

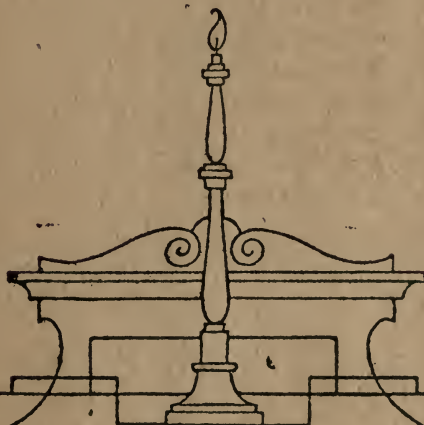
THE HOUSE OF MERRILEES

**WORKS BY
ARCHIBALD MARSHALL**

**THE SQUIRE'S DAUGHTER
THE ELDEST SON
THE HONOUR OF THE CLINTONS
RANK AND RICHES
PETER BINNEY, UNDERGRADUATE
THE HOUSE OF MERRILEES
RICHARD BALDOCK
EXTON MANOR
RODING RECTORY
WATERMEADS
MANY JUNES
UPSIDONIA
ABINGTON ABBEY
THE GRAFTONS**

THE HOUSE OF MERRILEES

By
ARCHIBALD MARSHALL



HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

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CHAPTER I

THE COTTAGE AT HIGHGATE

SOME years ago there came to the pleasant suburb of Highgate, to a little cottage at the end of the lime grove, by the church, a young woman and her infant son. Her name was Mrs. Greenfield, and although she was young in years, the lines in her face, and the grey threads showing through her brown hair, seemed to tell of troubles endured before she had lighted on this peaceful haven for herself and her child. Whatever those troubles may have been, her life now ran a tranquil course, and was lightened by her love for her little son and pride in his achievements. In his years of early childhood no hand but hers tended him, and she gave him his first lessons, finding him quick to learn and a very glutton for books. He soon reached the limits of her modest attainments, and was sent at a very early age to the old school at the top of the hill.

This was a great day for little George. He proudly refused all escort, set out by himself to take his first plunge into life, and came running all the way home at half past twelve o'clock, an excited little knickerbockered figure, to find his mother waiting at the gate for him, to whom he poured out all the thronging events of the morning, from the nine o'clock service in the chapel, "full of boys, mother, some with moustaches, and all the masters in their gowns, and the clergyman who read the prayers with a red thing on his back, not a black and white one like the vicar," through his short examination by the awful headmaster, who had smiled at his littleness and put his hand on his head, to the culminating event of his ending up three places from the top of the form instead of at the very bottom.

Thereafter followed years of work and quiet contentment. The cottage had a shady little garden in front and another behind. Its rooms were very cosy. In the winter evenings, when the two sat together in the parlour, with the lamp

on the table, George at his lessons and his mother at her needlework, they might have been far away from the noise and stir of the great city. Everything was quiet, within and without, and Mrs. Greenfield would put down her work and gaze at the boy, with his curly head bent over his books, absorbed in his preparations for the morrow. Whatever trouble she had undergone in her early days it soon became plain, to her intense thankfulness, that this beautiful child of her heart, with his graceful, chivalrous ways, his clever brain and his balanced orderly outlook on life, would cause her none. There was unbroken love and confidence in the little cottage and a home life of constant companionship, upon which George ever after looked back with the tenderest feelings of gratitude.

Her early troubles Mrs. Greenfield hid from the child, but he divined something of them when he was old enough to ask her why she never spoke to him of his father. She became troubled, caught at her breast, and told him if he wanted to please her he must never speak to her on that subject again. "I was very unhappy before you were born," she said, "but I shall never be unhappy again if you grow up into a good man and never forget to love me."

And little George, with kisses and sobbed out words of love, climbed on to her lap and threw his arms round her neck and comforted her as only little children can comfort a woman, and not for years after troubled her with further questions.

There was one periodical visitor to the cottage whom George never liked. This was a Mr. Richards, a gloomy, taciturn man, who showed him none of the little kindnesses which take a child's heart. He grew to learn that Mr. Richards was in some sort the dispenser of his mother's income, although she told him as soon as he was old enough to understand that her income was her own, and not dependent on the goodwill of anybody. He supposed Mr. Richards to have been a friend of his father's, although his father was never alluded to between them; and he liked him none the better on that account. When George had embarked on his school career, Mr. Richards on his occasional visits would feign a vast interest in the progress of his studies, but the boy, with the penetration and impatient scorn of youth, detected soon enough that he had no real knowledge of the subjects on which he cross-

examined him. His mother had none either, but then she made no pretences, and he would talk fully to her of all things he was interested in, sure, at any rate, of her sympathy, while under the heavy hand of Mr. Richards he would retire into himself and refuse to be drawn either into discussion or self-revelation. He noticed also by-and-by that his mother looked forward to this man's visits with shrinking, and did not recover her usual tranquillity of spirit for some days afterwards. So he would look upon Mr. Richards with a dark and unfriendly eye when he appeared, and afterwards promise himself a time when he should be old enough to suggest to him that he should appear no more.

And so when Mrs. Greenfield told him one day, soon after he had begun to go to school, that poor Mr. Richards had lost his wife, George, so far from expressing pity for that gentleman, was inclined to the opinion, which, however, he did not impart to his mother, that it served him right. But when she went on to tell him that Mr. Richards had a little baby girl, that he had asked her if she would take care of her at Highgate, and that she had consented, George's feelings of grief and dismay were too keen to keep to himself. He threw himself into his mother's arms and implored her with tears and howls to preserve the inviolable sanctity of their home.

Mrs. Greenfield was touched by the child's fears and distress, but she told him that she should always love him best, and that if he loved his home and his mother he ought to be all the readier to share them with a poor little child who had neither.

George, perceiving the weak points in this argument, replied in effect that he could not spare any of his own mother, and that if the house in which Mr. Richards lived could not fitly be termed a home, which he could well believe, the baby girl was not old enough to know any better, and could not possibly object to it as much as he himself undoubtedly should if he were so unfortunate as to find himself in her place. It was a very unhappy little boy, instead of a very eager one, who went back to school that afternoon, and a very unhappy face that he carried about at home until the arrival of Mr. Richards with the baby girl in question two days afterwards put an end to his misery.

The baby girl was a sweet little gipsy of eighteen months.

Her name was Peggy. George could see no beauty in her as long as her father remained in the house, and behaved very much like a big puppy whose nose has been put out of joint by a very little one. But no sooner had Mr. Richards departed than he threw himself literally at her feet, and remained there metaphorically thenceforward. The joys of the quiet little household were doubled by the advent of this black-eyed, rosy, dimpled, audacious, tyrannical, naughty, kissable, merry, and altogether fascinating Peggy. George adored her from the bottom of his big heart, and she ruled him with a rod of iron. He would run home after school to be with her for five minutes, instead of tearing down to the playing-field as fast as his legs could carry him, and for the first time in his career he had some difficulty in settling down to his lessons in the evening, and never did so with an undivided mind until the mysteries of Peggy's evening toilet were accomplished, and she was put to bed in her little cot in Mrs. Greenfield's room. She introduced the element of childish naughtiness into the cottage, which had hitherto been singularly free from such an experience, and George found it impossible to judge whether she was most entrancing when she put her small foot down and insisted upon having her own way, or when, having been baulked in that decision, and the inevitable storm having burst and then passed away in showers of tears, she kissed and made friends again in adorable penitence. Mrs. Greenfield might have felt some twinges of jealousy over the whole-hearted devotion shown by the boy to the tiny child, but that it made no difference in his affection for herself. His heart was big enough to embrace them both.

Peggy, as she grew older, showed scant feelings of filial respect towards her father during his somewhat rare visits. She was so much the daughter of Mrs. Greenfield, and the sister of George, that a father whom she saw twice or at most three or four times a year could hardly expect much warmth of feeling from her. Nor did Mr. Richards show any great affection for the child. He never asked that she should visit him at his home, but seemed content to leave her entirely to Mrs. Greenfield's care. He took some interest in her education, however, and before she was eleven insisted upon her being packed off to a boarding school at Brighton.

George was at this time seventeen, and had somewhat asserted his authority over her. It made a great gap in his life when Peggy was carried off by her father in floods of tears at the beginning of the summer term. For a few days he was the most disconsolate of mortals, but the interests of his school work and of the approaching cricket season presently consoled him, and there were the holidays to look forward to, and the annual month at the sea-side. At the time George left Highgate to go to Cambridge Peggy was nearly thirteen. The discipline of school had somewhat lessened her tyrannical habits, and the relations of the pair were now reversed, George taking the lead and Peggy following him with sisterly admiration. For they were in all respects as brother and sister.

After George had decided in consultation with the authorities of the school to try for a Trinity scholarship, there was a curious contention between him and Mr. Richards, Mrs. Greenfield taking an unwilling part.

Mr. Richards had arrived at the cottage on an unexpected visit just before George was due at Cambridge for the scholarship examination. To the boy's utter amazement he made a strong objection to the course proposed. "I have been told," he said, "that Trinity is the college where rich men's sons go. Why do you fix on that one? You will get mixed up with a lot of idlers who do nothing but spend money and waste their time, and you will learn to play instead of work, and very likely to get into debt."

George had some difficulty in keeping a naturally hasty temper from asserting itself. "There are some six hundred undergraduates at Trinity," he said. "I daresay some of them are as you say, but they won't be my friends. I shall be a scholar, and, of course, work will be my chief object."

"So you say now," interrupted Mr. Richards.

"And so I shall say in a year's time if I get this scholarship," returned George, hotly, "and in two and three years' time. Trinity is the most learned college, as well as the largest, and if I can belong to it, I will."

"You had better leave it alone," said Mr. Richards, shortly, "and try somewhere else. You are the son of a poor woman, and I know what it is when a young man gets among a set of idlers."

George could not trust himself to answer, and left the room. He went up to his bedroom, and spent a bitter

half-hour by himself. At the end of that time his mother joined him.

"George, dear, can't you do as Mr. Richards advises you, and try at some other college?" she asked.

George turned to her. "What, you against me too, mother?" he exclaimed, in a voice that showed how sore he felt.

"No, darling, never that," she replied gently, "but he has had experience, and he is very much set against it."

"Experience!" echoed George, throwing out his hands. "What is his experience worth in such a matter as this? I can see what he is well enough. A successful business man, no doubt, who has made himself what he is. What standing does that give him that his advice should be taken against that of the Head, and all my friends among the masters who are taking such a kind interest in my future? And what do his objections amount to?" he went on rapidly. "Just this, that because at the best of all the colleges there are some men who are there to amuse themselves amongst all those who go there to learn, I can't be trusted to keep my head and stick to my work. Do you know me as little as that, mother?"

"No, dear, no," replied Mrs. Greenfield. "But cannot you take just as high honours at another college, where the men are more of your own position in life? He says you can."

"He seems to know a lot about it," said George, bitterly. "Mother, why should I give up the honour of taking a part in such great traditions, if I can earn it, for the sake of another man's whims—a man who has no authority over me? Why, one of the greatest scholars Trinity has produced was the son of a blacksmith, and one of her greatest masters was the son of a carpenter. Have I shown myself so weak in character that I can't live in a place where there are some rich men without giving up all my hopes and ambitions for the sake of aping their ways? I care nothing about Mr. Richards's mistrust of me, but it is hard to find that you share it, mother."

"Dear George, you know that I have no mistrust of you," said Mrs. Greenfield. "But I have learnt to-day something that I did not know before. There is a sum of money set aside for your education if you should go to the University after you leave school. You are to have £150 a year as

long as you remain at Oxford or Cambridge, and after that, whatever is left out of a thousand pounds is to be given to you to help you towards any occupation you may wish to take up. It would help you very much, but it is within Mr. Richards's power to grant it or withhold it, and if you do not follow out his wishes he may not see fit to let you have it."

"I will go and talk to him about that," said George, impulsively, and he ran out of the room. Mrs. Greenfield sat down by the window and left the boy to fight his own battle.

George, with his head raised, entered the parlour, where Mr. Richards sat by the round table.

"My mother has just told me, sir," he said, "that you are able to grant me some money to help me through the University. Will you answer me one question? Was that money left by my father for that purpose?"

Mr. Richards looked at him from behind half-closed eyelids.

"Yes," he said.

"It won't come from you personally?"

"No."

"But you have the power of granting it or withholding it as you see fit?"

"Yes, that is so."

"And if I do not give up my intention of trying to get into the college I have chosen you will withhold it?"

"I don't say that definitely. But I should consider the matter very carefully."

"You may do as you please about it, sir," said George, hotly. "I can do without the money. Our decision—my mother's and mine—was taken under advice from men who understand these things, and understand me and my circumstances, without reference to it. If I get a scholarship and the school exhibition—with those and the money my mother can allow me—I shall have enough to live upon; not in the same way as the men you seem to have heard about; but I am going to Cambridge to work, and not to play, and I shall have as much as I want."

Mr. Richards looked at the boy standing before him, flushed and excited, but full of resolve and self-confidence. A careful observer might have noticed a certain admiration

in his gaze, but to George it exhibited nothing but baffled obstinacy.

"Then you have decided to take your own way and ignore my advice," he said.

"I don't think you are the man to advise me upon such a question," said George, boldly, the dislike that had grown during his boyhood showing itself in his words and tone.

Mr. Richards shifted his position. "That's as may be, young man," he said. "You shall have my decision after I have learnt the result of this examination. Now, with your leave, I will go and eat my lunch, and I should like to talk to your mother alone till it is time to go and catch my train."

George's resentment flamed up. "Why do you try and set my mother against me?" he cried. "We have talked over all this, and she will be as proud of my success, if I do succeed, as I shall be myself. We don't ask your help. Who are you? What power have you got that you should come between my mother and me?"

Mr. Richards brushed past him. "I shan't come between you," he said, abruptly. "You can do as you please;" and with that he left the room.

George remained in the little parlour until Mr. Richards had left the house, without coming in again or calling for him to say good-bye. He stood at the window, looking out into the garden, seeing nothing, drumming on the glass with the tassel of the blind. Thoughts that he had never had before passed through his mind, impalpable suspicions, bitter resentments. His hopes for the future and his happy confidence in the integrity of his purpose were darkened. The world was still a fair place to live and work in, but a cloud of mistrust had obscured its brightness. His mind was full of impatience and scorn, and blighting fears of he knew not what. It was the blackest half-hour he had ever known.

When the door had been heard to close behind the man who had been talking in secret to his mother, while he stood there alone and unhappy, Mrs. Greenfield came into the room. "Mother," he cried, turning to face her, "tell me who this man is and what hold he has upon you that you are so anxious to please him and to take his advice."

Mrs. Greenfield stopped in amazement. She had come

into the room with an air of contentment and a face free from care. Her expression changed, and she sank into a chair, her hand to her heart.

"There is some secret," said George. "I know there is. Your whole appearance changes when I ask you about him. What is he to you, that you and he should conspire together against me?"

A faint colour came into Mrs. Greenfield's pale cheeks. "You have no right to say that, George," she said. She spoke in a tone that George had never heard her use before. "There is no conspiracy against you. Do you think I would conspire against my son? You are making a great deal out of a very little. In this very matter that has been discussed this morning, Mr. Richards has offered his advice and you have rejected it. I am glad you did so, because I think there is no foundation for his fears. How could he have a hold over you, or over me, as you say, when you, a boy of eighteen, are allowed to have the last word on a matter like that?"

George looked at her, half convinced. "Then what has he been talking about that I must not hear?" he asked.

"We spoke of the money that he has in trust for you," replied Mrs. Greenfield, "and about my income, of which he is also the trustee, and about other things."

"Other things!" echoed George, his suspicions renewed. "What other things, mother?"

"That I cannot tell you," answered Mrs. Greenfield. "They have to do with my life before you were born, and of that I will never tell you of my own free will."

She spoke with no little vehemence for so mild-mannered a woman.

"How does this man come by his authority over us, mother?" asked George, returning to the suspicions that filled his mind. "He can let me have this money or not as he wishes. He says it was left me by my father. Is that true? Has he got control of your money beyond administering it for you?"

"George, my dear," said his mother, quietly, "you must not throw doubt on what Mr. Richards tells you. My money is my own, and he has no power over it, or over me. The thousand pounds will come to you at some time, whatever may be decided with regard to Trinity College. He has the power of withholding it now, but not altogether.

It is intended to give you a start in life. He is acting as he thinks best, and he is not your enemy as you seem to regard him."

"Answer me one question, mother," said George. "Do you like and trust this man?"

"I trust him implicitly."

"Do you like him?"

"No," she said, quietly.

CHAPTER II

CAMBRIDGE DAYS

GEORGE won his scholarship, and within a week heard from Mr. Richards that a sum of £150 a year would be paid him until he had taken his degree, when the balance that remained out of a thousand pounds would be handed over to him. Mr. Richards also wished him success in his career, and made no further mention of the rich idlers who had bulked so large in his conceptions of the society of Trinity College.

The climax of George's years of school life came on his last Speech Day, when, as a young man of nearly nineteen, for two years past captain of the School, he sat blushing in the big school-room, while the headmaster announced to the assembled company his success in winning a Major Scholarship at Trinity College, Cambridge, and the first exhibition from the school itself. It had been a good year in the matter of prizes and scholarships for Highgate School. Other names were read out along with George's, but none so often as his. He went up to the dais again and again, and carried away a small library of calf-bound books, and each time he went up he was more vociferously applauded than before, for his schoolfellows appreciated the honours he had gained and would gain for them, and he had carried out his bat for 120 in the match against the M.C.C. the day before. The ladies in the big school-room looked upon him graciously, for he was a handsome fellow, dark and tall, and well set up, and he accepted his honours, and the plaudits that accompanied them, with a modest composure which sat very well on him.

And in the very place in the back of the room where George as a very small boy had first imbibed learning eleven years before, sat his mother, looking on at his triumph with brimming eyes. She knew no one immediately around her, and when the old bishop who was giving away the prizes made a speech, in which he spoke

of the pleasure it had given him to come back to his old school and to see its traditions so worthily maintained on all hands, and he might say brilliantly maintained in the case of his young friend the captain of the school (a ringing outburst of cheers and clapping, with difficulty quelled by the headmaster), Mrs. Greenfield broke down and cried softly into her handkerchief tears of pride and pleasure.

And after the speeches were over George broke away as soon as might be from the guests amongst whom duty took him at the headmaster's house, and ran home just as if he were a little boy still, to the cottage, where he talked over the events of the day, of his whole school life, and of the new life that was opening out before him, to the most sympathetic listener in the world, until the clock striking one reminded them that it was long past their bed time. Amongst other surroundings in after-years his boyhood, now closing, remained to George as a happy memory, for he had known the full sweetness of home life.

George's career at Cambridge was marked by the success which had been prophesied for him during his school days. His success, in fact, was complete and triumphant. He won almost every prize and distinction that came within the course of reading he had adopted, and finished up alone in the first division of the first class of the Classical Tripos. In his third year he got into the University Cricket Eleven, and made his appearance at Lord's in the match against Oxford. Mr. Richards, when this news came to his ears, might perhaps have recalled his early warning against regarding Cambridge as a place to play and not to work in. And, indeed, a place in the University Eleven does make demands both on the purse and on the time of an undergraduate who attains to it. But as regards the former, George's prizes and the sum of money which was paid into his account once a quarter by Mr. Richards himself, made him far better off than the average undergraduate, even at Trinity, and, as far as his work went, his First Class had never been in doubt, it being the general opinion that he could have taken it in his second year, had he been so disposed. He had gone through a thoroughly good grounding at Highgate School, under the teaching of the headmaster, himself a fine scholar, and he had read diligently and continuously at Cambridge. There had scarcely

been a working day in his life, either at school or at college, on which he could look back as wasted, as against so many days and weeks and months that most men of his age can count as lost.

On a deliberate determination he widened his interests during his third year, and lessened his hours of reading for his Tripos work. He spoke often at the Union, and attained in due course the president's chair. He was an extreme Radical in those early days. He was accustomed to speak of himself as a man of the people, and the contrast between his finely cut face, his graceful and noble bearing, and the refinement of his speech on the one hand, and his asserted claim to lowly birth on the other, was not a little curious. In the generous republic of youth, birth, high or low, is of little account, and no more popular man than George Greenfield walked the streets and courts of Cambridge during those happy undergraduate days.

In his fourth year he left the paths of classical learning and read for the History Tripos. He was told that his Fellowship was in danger, but he had wider aims than the cloistered scholastic career, and was even in those early days casting a diffident eye towards Parliament. And when the time came he sat for his Fellowship, as the phrase goes, and duly won it.

During the four years of his University career it may be supposed that George was not without occasional self-searchings on the subject of Mr. Richards and his connection with his own and his mother's history. His life was so brimful of eagerness and interest, and his home, when he visited it, so quiet, so happy, so normal in every way, that the questions he sometimes put to himself troubled his mind at rare intervals, and even then assumed no great importance.

But there were times when he asked himself from whence he had sprung; what kind of a man was the father of whom he was forbidden to speak; what bad thing had he done that his gentle mother could not bear to hear him mentioned without fear and shrinking; who was the dark-browed arrogant man who wielded such strange yet limited power over the fortunes of their little household and his own career; what connection had he with the tale of shame which had clouded his mother's early life; and would the mystery of that tale and all that hung on it

ever pass the lips of the two who alone possessed the key to it, and be revealed to him ?

From his mother he felt he should never hear it. Perceiving, as he had first done in his boyhood, what trouble the bare mention of the past brought to her, what distress she exhibited at any inquiries concerning it, and what alarm at the possibility of his mind running upon the subject, he had long since resolved that no word or sign from him should rouse uneasiness in her ; that he would return the love and devotion she showed towards him with unquestioning confidence, and never distress her by any reference to what she wished to conceal. And he was at ease in this decision. He knew her as few sons know their mothers, and was entirely satisfied that nothing he might learn concerning her could lessen his love and respect. Whoever had sinned in the past, it could not have been she. But he judged that her fear of a discovery on his part was on account of this very possibility—that a cloud might rise between them—and being convinced that that fear was groundless, he told himself that it was from Richards he would drag the secret, and that he would be justified in doing so, both for his own sake, and because, if he knew her story, he could better watch over her and shield her from any ill effect that might still result from it. If he had had a shadow of doubt of her perfect integrity, he might have chosen to put the whole subject out of his mind as far as possible and probe no further, for fear of destroying the perfection of their relationship ; but in that case the relationship would not have been perfect, and, as a matter of fact, he felt no such doubt. And so the end of his cogitations was always the same. At some time which he would choose himself he would come to close quarters with Mr. Richards, put certain questions to him, and demand an answer to them. He thought it possible that his attitude might somewhat surprise that gentleman, and he smiled grimly within himself as he pictured the interview. The man had treated him hitherto as a person of small account, had exercised what authority circumstances had placed in his hands without tact, and had ridden rough-shod over his prejudices and aspirations. He would find himself on that day that was coming met by an antagonist with a determination and self-confidence equal to his own, and if he should essay to take up his old

ground of somewhat contemptuous superiority he would be warned off it with no ambiguity of language.

The interview which George definitely promised himself, but for which he was in no hurry, delayed itself during the whole of his time at Cambridge. For two years he never set eyes on Mr. Richards, whose visits to Highgate took place during term time. Then he met him unexpectedly during a short "exeat," but was unprepared; and he was treated with greater respect than formerly, so that his dislike of the man slumbered. Again, a year later they met, and George surveyed the ground with an eye for possible openings, but none came. Mr. Richards behaved almost as if he had divined what was in his mind, and seemed to shirk the possibility of finding himself alone with him. He asked many questions about George's life and work at the University, not in the hectoring tone he had employed towards him in his school days, but with a show of genuine interest, almost with diffidence. George's antagonism was disarmed for the time being. His mother seemed to be more at ease than formerly in her visitor's presence, and was plainly relieved at the almost friendly tone that each used towards the other. After all, the fellow was scarcely worth thinking about. His own life was so full that there was little room in it for dreams or conjectures. Probably until this meeting the fact of Mr. Richards's existence had not been present to his mind for weeks past. The destined interview could wait, but it should take place some day. And gradually the decision formed itself in George's mind that that day should be when he had left his University career behind him and was ready to make his first plunge into the work of the world. So he went back to Cambridge for his last year, and having made his decision, was less troubled with doubts and questionings than he had ever been since the conviction had forced itself upon him that his early history was not as that of other young men.

Mrs. Greenfield, proud though she was of her son's career, could only be induced to pay him one visit at Cambridge. That was at the end of his fourth year, and Peggy, now a slim schoolgirl of seventeen, about to embark on a "finishing" course at Dresden and Paris, came too. For one glorious June day, during the height of what are known as the May week festivities, she revelled in the

delights of one of the most beautiful places in England, and, it must be confessed, showed no displeasure at the not very closely concealed admiration of the undergraduate world. It was unfortunate that George had to be in attendance at Fenner's, where the University was engaged in a struggle with the crack cricket county, but he had finished his innings the day before and was not likely to be called upon to field until the middle of the afternoon. He met them at the station early in the morning, showed them the cream of the colleges, rowed them up and down the "Backs," took them round the Trinity Fellows' garden, and then to his rooms in a corner of the Great Court for a rest and lunch.

Peggy was enchanted with everything, and thought Cambridge the most delightful place she had ever seen. She poked into every corner of George's large low-ceilinged southward-facing room, pleasant enough, with its windows open and the scent of wallflowers stealing in from the bed beneath them, rummaged amongst his most sacred papers, and arrayed herself in his bachelor's gown and cap.

"I have asked a friend to lunch," said George. "He went down two years ago, but he has come up for the day. His name is Guy Bertram."

"George, dear, why did you ask any one?" exclaimed Mrs. Greenfield with apparently unnecessary alarm. "Cannot we just be together?"

"Too late now, mother, I'm afraid. I see him coming across the Court. But you are sure to like him. Everybody does."

"You live so much out of the world, mother darling," said Peggy, bending over to kiss her, "that every stranger frightens you. Now I love meeting new faces."

Guy Bertram, who came into the room at that moment, presented an appearance that was eminently attractive. He was fair-faced and fair-haired, and possessed of an easy smiling manner that had gained him many friends among members of his own sex and numerous admirers in the ranks of the other. He immediately made himself entirely at home and behaved as if he had known George's "people" all his life.

The luncheon, with its immemorial May week menu of mayonnaise, cold lamb, a *crème brûlée*, strawberries and cream, and champagne cup, struck Mrs. Greenfield as

extravagant, and, to tell the truth, the presence of a young man so immaculately got up and so very much at his ease as Mr. Guy Bertram seemed to make her strangely ill at ease. To Peggy it all appeared the most natural thing in the world and the most delightful. It was life as it should be, and as it would be, when once the exigencies of lessons and drillings were over, and she had been duly "finished" at Dresden and Paris. Guy Bertram, with the experience of two years of life in the great world at his back, showed himself none the less good-natured in calling forth and responding to the sallies of this happy schoolgirl, and addressed himself no more to his host or his host's mother than the usages of politeness demanded. He exhibited himself in an unselfish light when the afternoon's programme was discussed, and expressed himself willing to take the burden of their entertainment on his own unaided shoulders. Mrs. Greenfield was left in George's room to rest while the three went down to Fenner's. George, being summoned into the field sooner than he had expected, owing to the unfortunate collapse of the tail of the Cambridge batsmen, left Peggy to the protection of his friend, who presently discovered that their seats were rather hard and uncomfortable, and suggested a perambulation, during which he acknowledged the greetings of several young men of unimpeachable fashion, none of whom displayed any unwillingness to catch his eye.

Chartering a fly for the rest of the afternoon, they picked up Mrs. Greenfield at Trinity, and drove down to Ditton Paddock, where there were more perambulations in a still denser crowd, and Peggy's black eyes and graceful girlish figure attracted still further attention, of which, it may be said, she affected to be entirely unconscious. Here she was taught by her guide to distinguish the different colours of the boats' crews paddling up to the starting point, and induced under considerable pressure to shout success to Third Trinity, as Guy's old schoolfellows chased the boat in front of them round Ditton Corner and up the Long Reach. It was First Trinity they were trying to bump, and George told her afterwards that she ought to have shouted "First" if she must shout at all, but she explained that Mr. Bertram had told her that she ought to encourage a crew from Trinity, as it was George's college, and had selected that one as deserving of her good wishes.

A little dinner in George's room ended the day. Guy Bertram had accepted an invitation to dine elsewhere, and seemed disposed to resent the action of his prospective host in having invited him ; but he was not encouraged to carry out his half-expressed intention of letting his engagement slide, and took himself off, leaving a pleasant impression of unaffected good nature behind him. George saw them off in the evening, as tired and as happy as possible, and Peggy never ceased talking of her day in Cambridge or of the oracular utterances of Mr. Bertram, until the delights of the opera at Dresden and the uniforms of the German soldiery somewhat effaced the older impressions.

A week later George had packed up his possessions and transferred himself once more to the cottage at Highgate. He was still, in many respects, the boy of four years before who had bearded Mr. Richards on the subject of entering at Trinity College, where he had since so amply justified his own determination to succeed. He was as loving and as careful as ever of his mother, and as proud as ever of his old school, which had by this time exalted him into a hero. He would go down to the field and coach the budding cricketers at the nets, and a group of boys would stand round to see him bat, while others would vie for the honour of bowling to him. He would go and smoke of an evening with the younger masters at their lodgings. The stern headmaster himself had no terrors for him, and small boys stood aghast as they saw him walk down from the school to the schoolhouse engaged in friendly conversation with that unapproachable dignitary. At home he was just as simple and contented in his habits as before, but his mother could hardly help realising that he was on his way to larger spheres of action than would be embraced in that simple cottage, and that attainments such as his could not be confined to the quiet back-water that eddied among the trees and lanes of Highgate, while the thronging interests and hazards of active life called to him from the great city to plunge into the stream. For the whole summer he stayed with her, going away for a few days now and then to play cricket, and rejoiced her heart by asking her to go to Norway with him in September, for which month he had taken a rod on a salmon river. She refused. She saw that his life would take him into places

and scenes where she could not follow him, and preferred to make the break then, of her own choice, rather than be forced to it later on. She was content to live her retired life, sunning herself in the reflection of his successes, and her instinct told her that he would be grateful to her afterwards for keeping her quiet home for him, apart from the turmoil of the great world. For she knew that she had succeeded in making his childhood and youth in that same home happy, and that he would always look back upon them with gratitude and affection. And what could she want more than that from a son who still loved her fondly, but had got far beyond the need of her guidance and protection?

One evening, a week or so after he had settled himself at the cottage at Highgate for the rest of the summer, George said to his mother, "And when are we to have the pleasure of seeing our friend Mr. Richards again?"

Mrs. Greenfield's face underwent the instant change which her son had learnt to connect with every mention of the man who stood mysteriously in the dark rooms of her life and forbade her to shut the door on their secrets. It was in the evening. She had been sitting working at the table, chatting intermittently with George, who was looking through a paper by the window. Her expression had been peaceful and contented. Now suddenly she was alert, distressed. George affected not to notice the change, though it filled him with resentment against the cause of it.

"I want to settle up this money business," he made haste to say. "I shall be going about later, and may miss him. I might go up to Glasgow and see him on my way to Norway, if he is not likely to be coming here soon."

"It would be a good deal out of your way," she said, trying to speak in level tones, "and Mr. Richards would come here if I asked him. Or he could send you the money. The matter is quite settled, and there is nothing to discuss."

George hardly knew what to reply. He had made up his mind to a decisive interview with Mr. Richards, but he did not wish his mother to divine his intention; and yet he could not approach him unless it was through her. He did not even know where to find him.

"There is no particular hurry," he said. "But I might write to him. Will you give me his address, mother?"

Somewhat to his surprise, Mrs. Greenfield complied with his request at once. She took a sheet of paper and wrote :

“ R. RICHARDS, Esq.,
c/o Messrs. McDougall & Co.,
10, Wyngate Street,
Glasgow.”

George read it with some curiosity. “ What particular business are Messrs. McDougall & Co. engaged in ? ” he asked.

“ I believe they are insurance brokers,” she replied. “ But I do not know.”

“ Very well, then,” said George, folding up the paper and putting it into his pocket-book. “ I will write to Mr. Richards.”

CHAPTER III

SOME LETTERS AND AN INTERVIEW

THE correspondence between George and Mr. Richards was so tersely expressed that it may as well be given in full. George wrote as follows :

“ DEAR MR. RICHARDS,

“ My time at Cambridge has come to an end, and I intend to take rooms in the Temple about October next, and read for the Bar. The time has now come, according to the instructions I understand you to have received from my father, for you to put into my hands what is left of the sum of money set aside for my education and start in life. If you are intending to come to London within the next month I should like to meet you at any place which you may appoint, not in Highgate, so that we may settle up our affairs. I also wish to have a conversation with you upon other matters, and I do not want my mother to be worried any further with what I am now quite old enough to take upon my own shoulders. I therefore ask you to settle a time and place at which we can meet, and to say nothing to her of our interview.

“ I am,

“ Yours truly,

“ GEORGE GREENFIELD.”

To this Mr. Richards replied after a week's interval :

“ DEAR GEORGE,

“ I enclose cheque for £400, with which you are at liberty to do what you please. There is nothing more to settle between us, and I can see no use in the interview you propose. Please send receipt for cheque.

“ Yours truly,

“ R. RICHARDS.”

George wrote the same day :

"DEAR MR. RICHARDS,

"I enclose a formal receipt for the cheque you were good enough to send me.

"The interview I propose is for my own satisfaction, and I must press for it. I shall be in my rooms in the Temple at the beginning of October, and if you are likely to be in London before the end of that month, we can meet there. If not, I will call on you in Glasgow about the 5th or 6th of September, when I shall be on my way to Norway, or at the end of the month, on my return. Kindly let me know which of these arrangements will suit you best.

"Yours truly,

"GEORGE GREENFIELD."

Mr. Richards again took some days to reply, and when he did his letter was a curt proposal for an appointment in London on a date early in October.

"That is the end of the preliminary round," said George to himself, as he sealed up his acceptance. Then he succeeded in emptying his mind of the subject for nearly three months, during which he enjoyed himself to his heart's content, standing as he did at that enviable pause in a young man's life when, with a clean well-ordered youth behind him, he looks forward with hope and determination to the work in which his life is to be spent.

At the end of September he was settled in his chambers, embarked on the struggle which was to lead him, he hoped, to fame and fortune. His time was fully occupied between his legal studies and the political journalism which had come to him almost unsought, so clear were his views and so clever his pen, and he climbed the hill upon the top of which stood Highgate and his mother's cottage only when the end of the week put an end to the constant occupations of his working hours.

The appointed day came for his interview with Mr. Richards. That gentleman came to him early in the morning, and in no very amiable mood.

"Now then," he said, roughly, as he entered the room, "what is it you have brought me all the way from Scotland to say?" and vouchsafed no further greeting.

"I had no wish to bring you all the way from Scotland, Mr. Richards," replied George. "I offered to come to you in Glasgow."

Mr. Richards grunted.

"As you chose to come to me," pursued George, coolly, "I won't offer any apology. Will you have some breakfast? It can be ready in ten minutes."

"No, thank you," said the other, shortly, depositing his rug and a small travelling bag on the sofa and taking a seat at the table. "I have got just a quarter of an hour to spare, so say what you have got to say and get it over."

"What I have got to say will take more than a quarter of an hour," replied George. "It looks as if I should have to come to you in Glasgow after all."

Richards threw a look at him. "Well, don't waste time," he said. "What do you want?"

"You know very well what I want, sir," said George. "I want to know who my father was. I want to know the secret which has troubled my mother ever since I was born, and with which you are connected in some way. I want to know who *you* are and by what right you interfere in what concerns her and me alone. I want——"

"Come now," interrupted the other, "have I interfered in your affairs? *Have I?*"

"Yes," said George, boldly; "you tried to stop me going to Trinity."

"But you went, and I paid you your allowance as regular as clockwork, although I *could* have stopped you if I had been minded to."

"Exactly so. You could have stopped me if you had been minded to. I want to know by what right."

"Then you won't know. And when I say I could have stopped you, of course I couldn't. I could have only held back your money. I didn't do so, as I say, and I certainly haven't interfered with you in any way since, and don't intend to. Don't interfere with me."

"Look here, Mr. Richards," said George, "when we last came to close quarters I was a boy, and you took advantage of that fact to talk to me in a way I resented. Now I am a man, we meet on equal terms, and I simply won't put up with it."

"You've got me down here," retorted Richards, with some excitement, "and you put a lot of questions to me which I won't answer."

"Then why did you come?" George flashed at him.

"You knew perfectly well what I was going to ask you. Why did you come?"

Mr. Richards was reduced to a sulky silence, which seemed hardly warranted by so simple a question. George took his advantage without quite understanding how he had gained it.

"You had better recognise that you have a man to deal with now," he said, "and also that I have a right to expect an answer to the questions I am asking you."

"I don't admit that," said Mr. Richards, but in a vastly more conciliatory tone than he had hitherto employed. "And why do you come to me? Why don't you ask your mother what you want to know?"

"You are playing with me, Mr. Richards," said George. "I know, or, if you like, I guess, that my mother fears an estrangement if I learn what I mean to learn. I ask you because I know that nothing I can learn can make any difference in my love for her."

"You ask me," put in Mr. Richards with a grim smile, "because you know she would not tell you."

"You can put it that way if you like. At any rate, I do ask you. Who was my father, and what did he do that his name must never be mentioned between my mother and me?"

Mr. Richards sat for a moment silent. Then he said with as near an approach to frankness as his gruff manner would admit, "I can't answer that question, George. At least I can't answer it now. There may come a time when I can tell you something, but——"

"I want to know now," interrupted George, impatiently. "I have had enough of this mystery, which is shadowing and in some ways spoiling my mother's life. I am old enough now, more than old enough, to take her burden on my shoulders. What is it that is troubling her?"

"I can tell you that," said Richards decisively. "There is nothing troubling her at all except the fear that you may do what you are trying to do now, and find out her secret."

"That isn't true," said George.

Richards's brow darkened at once. "I don't take such words from any man," he said.

"You'll take what you're very ready to give, and that is plain-speaking," said George. "Why is it that at the very

mention of your name her whole attitude changes? Why is it that for days before and after your visits she loses her tranquillity and becomes anxious and worried? You may not know these things. I have known them ever since I was a child."

"You are making too much of it. Your mother went through a deal of trouble in her early life, and whenever she sees me it brings it to her mind. I'm sorry for it; but I can't help it. And she doesn't like me. I can't help that either. I don't lay myself out to be liked."

"Oh, it's something more than that. It is dread. She fears something."

"I've told you what she fears, and, as true as I'm here, it is that and nothing else. What is past is over and done with. It won't trouble her again."

"Well, take it at that, then. She fears my discovering the past, because she thinks it may part us. If I can go and say to her, 'I know your secret, and now nothing can ever come between us,' she will get rid of the shadow once and for all."

"And so you come to me and ask me to give away your mother's secrets behind her back. Is that what you call honourable conduct, Mr. George Greenfield?"

"I don't come to you for a lesson in honour, Mr. Richards. I want the truth out of you."

"You'll get nothing out of me but what I choose to tell you. And you may take this from me. If I were to tell you everything it would not relieve your mother at all. Leave things as they are. She's happier now than she could ever have expected to be. You are not doing her any good by trying to drag the past to light."

"Very well then, we'll leave that point. But my convictions on it are unchanged. Now I ask on my own account. Who was my father? It is intolerable that a man of my age should be kept in ignorance like a child. I have a right to know."

"You have a right to ask, perhaps. But the person you must ask is your mother. If she chooses to keep you in ignorance, you must put up with it. You've got no right whatever to expect to hear anything from me."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. You are not quite so irresponsible as all that. You have got the management of my mother's income entirely in your hands. Who gave

you that trust? How have you exercised it? Have we been dependent on your charity for the last twenty years, or does the money belong to my mother?"

"It belongs to her, of course. I make the best use of it I can for her. Do you accuse me of behaving dishonestly about it?"

"I don't accuse you of anything. I simply don't know anything about you. You may be doing the best you can for her, or you may not. You have got to satisfy me on that point."

Mr. Richards rose. "I've put up with enough," he said, angrily. "And now I'm going. I'll tell you nothing, and you can do what you like."

"Then I'll tell you what I will do," replied George. "I shall put the matter into the hands of a solicitor, and I shall instruct him to find out all he can about you."

Mr. Richards faced round with a dark look on his face. "That's a pretty thing to hear from you to me," he said.

"I daresay it surprises you," returned George. "You have been used to treating me as a person of no account whatever for a good many years. It must be a shock to you to discover that the time for that treatment has gone by."

"Is it to be war between us?" asked Richards, with a penetrating look.

"That is for you to decide."

"Because you don't imagine that I'm the sort of man to sit down quietly under the sort of thing you suggested just now."

"Probably not; and that is just the reason why I should do it. You have done a good deal of sitting down quietly, Mr. Richards. If you won't speak to me in a straightforward manner, and tell me what I want to know, I'll take what steps I can to make you."

The two men faced each other squarely—the younger, upright, self-confident, fearless; the older, smouldering with anger, controlling himself with difficulty, but, it would seem, pushed into a corner. And mixed with his hardly restrained impatience and baffled arrogance, there showed another feeling against which he appeared to struggle—a hint of respect which had been far from his previous treatment of the young man who now stood

facing him, demanding an account of his stewardship. He turned away, and sat down again in his place.

"I'll tell you what you want to know," he said, shortly ; and George's mental muscles relaxed at the sign of victory.

It was a moment or two before Mr. Richards spoke again. "Mrs. Greenfield was married young," he began, "to a man who ill-treated her almost from the first."

"Who was he ?" asked George, sharply.

"Nobody knew what he was. He was an adventurer, I suppose—a gambler, certainly."

"Was he what is called a gentleman ?"

"I don't know. I never saw him."

"You never saw him ?"

"No. I met her first after he had deserted her, not much more than a year after they were married, and I helped her."

"How ?"

"I put her affairs into order."

"Her money affairs I suppose you mean. Where did her money come from if—if my father had deserted her ?"

"It was her own. He had left her penniless."

"Penniless ! How could he have left her penniless if she had enough money to enable her to live comfortably, as she has done ever since ?"

"I meant *he* left her nothing."

"And he was a gambler and an adventurer ! That hardly seems likely from what one hears of such people, Mr. Richards."

Richards looked at him squarely. "I'm telling you the truth," he said. "If you want to hear more, don't throw doubt on my word."

"I beg your pardon," said George.

"Her money came to her, fortunately, within a short time of his desertion of her. It was left to her by an old friend. It is of no use asking who, because I can't tell you. She didn't tell me. I took it in hand for her after she had come into possession of it, and invested it for her. You are right in thinking her husband was not the man to have left her if he had known of it. You can judge what sort of a man he was by the fact that he deserted her just a week before you were born. And now I'll tell you what I never thought to have told a living soul, least of all you. When I first met Mrs. Greenfield she was deserted

and in bitter trouble, and I asked her to—to go away with me.”

George sprang to his feet with eyes ablaze and hands clenched.

“You’ve asked for it, and you’ve got to hear it,” Richards shouted suddenly at him. “Sit down.” And George took his seat again without a word. Richards resumed his story in level tones. The flash of strong emotion had shone and passed in an instant.

“I told her,” he went on, “that when the time came she could get a divorce from him. I knew that such a man would be sure to give her an opportunity. And—well, I made some enquiries, and found out enough about him to have been able to send him about his business pretty sharp if he had ever molested her again. However, she refused, of course; but when her good fortune came I was glad to be able to help her. She would not have been so well off if it had not been for me.”

“I don’t understand a woman like my mother allowing you to act in that way for her after—after what had happened,” said George. “I do understand now one of the reasons of her dislike of you.”

“At any rate, I served her then, and I’ve served her ever since,” said Richards.

“But wait a minute. You told me that the thousand pounds were left me by my father, for my education.”

“Well, I told you a lie; and now you’ve got it. At least, I don’t call it a lie. You asked me if it was so, and if I had said, no, you would have gone on to ask what I didn’t choose to tell you. So I said, yes. I allowed you to think what you liked.”

“Where did the money come from then, and why didn’t my mother know of it?”

“I’ll tell you. Some of her money is invested in my business at so much per cent.—five per cent.—but I have used it in such a way as to bring in more, and that sum of a thousand pounds, and a little extra which she has since received, are her legitimate profits.”

“Then why didn’t she receive them without any conditions?”

“Because by law there was nothing to make me pay her more than the bare five per cent. I should have been perfectly justified in appropriating those extra profits

myself. Of course, I had no intention of doing so, but I did want to exercise some control over your actions at that time. I thought that if you went to a place where there were rich and idle young men, there might be a chance of your going wrong."

"Following in my precious father's footsteps, I suppose," said George bitterly. "Well, I can't say that I think you acted straightforwardly. I'll say too, that I think, if this money was really due to my mother, your attempt at interfering was absolutely unwarrantable. You declare to me now, without—without any mental reservation, that this thousand pounds was actually due to my mother, and that it was not——"

"I swear to you," interrupted Richards, almost with passion, "that I have never paid your mother a single penny out of my own pocket, except the small sum she takes for housing my daughter. And I'll go further," he went on, with growing excitement. "I'm willing to put into your hands every penny of her capital, and leave you to make the best of it."

Whether it was calculated to that end or no, he could not have made an offer more likely to disarm George's hostility.

"I needn't interfere with those arrangements, Mr. Richards," he said. "I would rather express gratitude to you for having managed my mother's affairs so well. You have satisfied me on that score. And as for the rest, I can only say that if you had told me what I wanted to hear to begin with, we might have saved some unpleasantness. It is about what I expected—unfortunately—no better, but certainly no worse. I should like to ask one more question. My mother has told me that my father is dead. How do you know that?"

"He was killed in a tavern brawl in San Francisco. I saw it by chance in an American paper, which gave his name, and published a photograph of him near enough to recognise. I told Mrs. Greenfield, but did not show her the paper."

"When was that?"

"Not long after he had deserted her. About twenty years ago."

There was silence for a minute. Mr. Richards seemed to have forgotten all about his appointment.

"Well," said George, slowly, "I know my parentage; and what I have to do is to atone for it. I shan't tell my mother that I know, and you will not tell her either."

Mr. Richards made no reply.

"You will promise not to tell her?" George pressed him.

"If you like," he replied with a hint of a sneer. "But I thought you were going straight to her directly you had got the story out of me."

"It would only pain her," said George. "And if she finds that you and I are on better terms, as I see no reason why we should not be now that we understand one another better, her fears will quiet down."

"I think so," said Mr. Richards; "and you are satisfied now? There is nothing more you want to ask?"

There was decided anxiety in his voice. But George did not notice it. His eyes were on the ground, and his thoughts were not concerned with his visitor.

"Then I will go," said Mr. Richards, and somewhat hurriedly he picked up his properties, and, without offering a shake of the hand, took himself off.

George sat down by the fire and went over in his mind the story he had heard. It was unpleasant enough, but, as he had said, it was no worse than he had expected. And yet, now that he had been told that he was the son of a mean rascal, with nothing to redeem his sordid baseness, he found it hard to adjust his thoughts to the fact. He seemed to carry a taint, and it was not until many days afterwards that he was able to put the knowledge of his birth on one side, and take up his life with his old determination and confidence.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOUSE OF MERRILEES

It was a quarter past ten on a fine morning in mid-June, two years after the events narrated in the last chapter. Mr. Guy Bertram, of whom we have already caught a passing glimpse, was sitting at breakfast and skimming the morning paper—a mere matter of form, for politics interested him not at all, and of what was going on in the world that did interest him, the paper told him little that was new. He was a popular young man, and went, as the phrase has it, everywhere.

The room was a pleasant one. It was high up in a block of bachelors' chambers looking south over St. James's Palace and Park, and west on St. James's Street. There was a recess in one corner with a low window-seat running round it. The walls were covered with a paper of grass-green and hung with old prints of some value. The deep easy chairs and comfortable sofa wore loose garments of gay chintz, over which red roses and little birds of a species unknown to ornithologists ran riot. There were a great many books, both on shelves and tables, and a grand piano stood in one corner.

The table at which Guy Bertram was breakfasting was near the open window. The sun, shining through striped awnings lowered outside, filled the room with a subdued yellow light, and the scent of musk from the window-boxes, filled otherwise with the orthodox marguerite daisy and hanging pink geraniums, stole insidiously on the senses and lingered there.

To complete the pleasures of a June morning in London in the middle of Ascot week, the incomparable band of the Grenadier Guards was playing the overture to "Carmen" in the quadrangle of St. James's Palace, while the usual crowd of desultory sightseers hung about, dividing their attention between the gallant soldiery and the tiny royalties who were to be seen with their nurses above the wall of the Marlborough House Gardens.

Guy Bertram had strolled through the twenty-six years of his life with but little to trouble him. He was an only son, and his mother had died soon after he was born. Poor soul, she had taken life seriously and nagged at her husband. He was a country clergyman and a spendthrift, but a charming companion, and his son had the pleasantest recollections of him. He had managed to send Guy to Eton, and given him plenty of pocket money. When the boy was sixteen his father died, leaving his financial affairs in inextricable confusion. Guy never knew how near he was to being taken away from school and thrown on the world penniless.

The knot had been cut by Sir Roderick Bertram, the spendthrift cleric's cousin. Most people could have told you something about Roderick Bertram; how he got into Parliament at the age of twenty-two and made a reputation for himself, and was talked of everywhere as the coming man of his party; how he made a romantic marriage with an Italian beauty and brought her home to his house of Merrilees, which stood in gardens of enchanting beauty on an island in the middle of a lake, all his own; and, finally, how he shut himself up in his island home after his wife's death, and was speedily forgotten, living thenceforward in unbroken solitude.

Sir Roderick, then, came forward, or rather Mr. Calthorp, senior partner in the firm of Calthorp, Griffin and Wells, solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, came forward on his behalf, cleared his cousin's estate of debt, and intimated his intention of providing for Guy's education and allowing him a thousand a year when he should reach the age of twenty-one. Young sixteen does not trouble itself much about money matters. Guy Bertram accepted the goods the gods had sent him without question, and it may be said, without gratitude, for he was his cousin's rightful heir. It is probable that he had never asked himself to this day what would have happened to him if Sir Roderick had held aloof. He had never seen his cousin or heard from him, except through Mr. Calthorp or his partners, and he might very well have considered that a man who exhibited no further interest in his nearest relation than to provide for his maintenance somewhat belied his actions by doing as much as that, or at any rate, by doing it on such a scale.

Guy had felt somewhat forlorn after his father's death;

but the summer holidays were at hand, and he was to travel abroad with a friendly tutor, so he soon cheered up, and, being a popular boy, with many friends, put his trouble behind him, and only took it out to look at with a tightening at his throat towards the end of each "half," when he had been wont to make plans for his holidays in the Hampshire rectory.

When the time came for him to leave school he went up to Cambridge, and spent two very pleasant years in that seminary of sound learning, doing enough work to avoid embarrassing attentions from the authorities of his college and taking his part in such sports and pastimes as seemed good to him. The only definite interest that he possessed, other than that of amusement, was art, and if he had been obliged to earn a living, his abilities were such as might very well have provided him with a career and an object in life. During his long vacations he really did apply himself with some purpose to the study of landscape painting, and gained an immense reputation amongst his fellows for his skill; and when he came of age, and was put into possession of his very considerable allowance, he half made up his mind to spend the next few years in diligent study, and to become in time a great painter. But he never got further than to take himself away from Cambridge.

There was no one to make any objection to this course of action except his undergraduate friends and a fatherly gyp, but his intentions with regard to painting seriously soon faded away, and within six months he became quite content simply to enjoy life as it opened out before him.

It must be confessed that he was eminently fitted for this pursuit. His tastes were clean, and he took pleasure in many simple things. He liked meeting his fellow-creatures, and found himself welcome enough wherever men and women were gathered together. He liked music and books and pictures, and he liked the sports of the field. He still painted, and painted remarkably well for an amateur, but his painting was one of his many recreations, and not the serious pursuit which he had thought of making it. He had perceptions, the means to gratify his tastes, and an untroubled conscience, and what can man want more at twenty-six? Life smiled on him this fine June morning—nay, beamed—for he had been to Ascot the day

before with a pleasant party and done very well with his small investments ; and he was going again to-day with a still pleasanter party, and hoped to do even better.

The soft rumbling of the passenger lift heralded a knock at the door, which was opened by a discreet serving-man, who announced, " Mr. Calthorp to see you, sir."

There advanced into the room a tall young man of about Guy's own age. He was dressed with the most consummate neatness from top to toe. His coat looked just three days old ; the crease down the middle of each trouser leg was undisturbed by the slightest digression at the knee ; the polish on his boots was only excelled by that of his hat, which he carried in a well-gloved hand. His black hair was so smooth that it looked as if it had been ironed. His face was long and preternaturally solemn, and his eyeglass looked so much as if he had been born with it, that no muscular effort disturbed its repose. But a little row of almost indistinguishable crow's feet at the corner of each eye and the slightest little twitch at the corner of the mouth, which appeared on a closer observation, served to qualify the first impression of excessive gravity. The name of Dick, by which Guy Bertram made haste to greet him, hardly seemed suitable, or even respectful, when conjoined with such an appearance as he presented ; and, indeed, he was called Richard in his home circle, which he much preferred. To make an end of introducing him, he was the junior partner in the firm of Calthorp, Griffin and Wells, and son to Sir Roderick Bertram's solicitor, recently deceased. And he had been Guy Bertram's friend since his school days.

" My dear Dick ! " exclaimed Guy. " What on earth brings you here at this time of the morning ? Coming to Ascot ? "

" I am not," replied Mr. Calthorp. " Nor are you. Sir Roderick Bertram died yesterday. My manner would be more tinged with gloom than it is if I did not know that you had never seen him."

The tiny crows' feet showed up for a moment and subsided. Mr. Calthorp placed his hat carefully on one chair and sat down on another, taking out of his pocket a letter-case, from which he extracted a yellow envelope.

" Good Lord ! " exclaimed Guy, staring at him with open mouth.

"Quite so," said Calthorp. "This telegram came last night after business hours, and we opened it this morning. It is from Martin, Sir Roderick's servant. It runs thus: 'Morthwaite, 7.45 p.m. Sir Roderick Bertram died this evening. Please inform Mr. Bertram. Robert Martin.'"

"Is that all?" asked Guy.

"That is all," replied Calthorp. "More could not have been said for sixpence."

"I must say you take it pretty coolly, Dick," said Guy, in a slightly injured tone.

"Well, I do," assented Calthorp. "If it were a near relation I hope I should know my duty as a family solicitor well enough to condole with you in appropriate terms. As Sir Roderick Bertram was your second cousin, twice or thrice removed—I forget which—and his lamented death makes you a baronet with about seventy thousand a year—unless he has left it away from you—the occasion does not seem to call for any elaborate display of grief."

"Was he as rich as all that?" enquired Guy, with a gleam of satisfaction in his eye.

"We have every reason to believe so."

"Show me the telegram," said Guy.

Calthorp handed it to him, and he stood in silence for a few minutes, turning over in his fingers the flimsy sheet which bore such momentous intelligence. The "Song of the Toreador" challenged a hearing through the rumble of the London traffic. Calthorp brushed an invisible speck of dust from his waistcoat.

"What are we going to do?" asked Guy.

"I think we had better go up there—to Cumberland," said Calthorp. "You certainly ought to go and take a hand in what I believe are called the obsequies, and I think I ought to go and see if I can find a will or something of that sort."

"Haven't you got one in your office?"

"No. Sir Roderick Bertram, as you are no doubt aware, was not quite like other people. My father used to go up to Merrilees to see him occasionally, a good many years ago, but for a long time he has done all his business with us by correspondence, and it has got to be very little of late. In fact, for some years it has chiefly confined itself to our receiving a quarterly cheque for your allowance, sending an acknowledgment, and paying the money into your bank,

from which, no doubt, it disappears with remarkable rapidity."

"And he never said anything to you about making a will?"

"No. My father, I believe, did venture to suggest it to him at the time the arrangement was entered into for your benefit. The estate is entailed and comes to you any way. But it brings in practically nothing. Sir Roderick inherited his enormous fortune from his mother. It was chiefly in American securities. He could leave that as he liked, and my father, I believe, suggested the advisability of his leaving it to you, or, at any rate, leaving it to somebody."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything. It was a way he had. He never answered the letter. And I should think the probability is he never made a will. In that case, as I believe you are his sole relation, you take everything, minus the amount which will be appropriated by the Chancellor of the Exchequer."

"It's a pleasant little sum," said Guy, cheerfully.

"There is some spending in it," admitted Calthorp. "Can you get ready to go by the two o'clock train from Euston? That will get us up there to-night?"

"Oh yes, easily."

"Very well, then. I will send a wire to this fellow Martin and tell him to meet us at Keswick. I must go home and get some clothes. We can talk in the train. Two o'clock then, and don't be late." And Mr. Calthorp put on his very shiny hat, buttoned two buttons of his coat, and went out.

Guy went into his bedroom to change his clothes, and summoned the discreet servant to pack his portmanteau. His face was thoughtful and even a little bewildered, but it gradually cleared, and as he slipped on a tweed jacket and filled his pockets, he began to whistle a tune.

An hour or two later Guy and Calthorp were sitting in a compartment of a corridor train, flying north.

"There is one thing I forgot to mention this morning," said Calthorp. "All Sir Roderick's securities are held by his stockbrokers, who revel in the name of Temple and Quality. I went back to the office after I had left you and had a note written to instruct them to send a statement to

me at Merrilees. I hope they will see their way to complying with my request; then we shall see where we stand."

"How much do you think it is, old man," enquired Guy, cheerfully.

"Well, I looked up what particulars we had. It was something a little over a million when old Lady Bertram died, and as Sir Roderick has been living in the closest retirement for about five and twenty years, it ought pretty well to have doubled itself by this time."

"That means eighty or ninety thousand a year. I shall be able to buy one or two things that I want," said the son of the spendthrift parson.

"If you get it."

"I shall get the house, anyhow. I believe it is one of the most beautiful places in England. I met an old woman once who had stayed there as a girl, in my great grandfather's time. She told me about the cascade, and the Italian gardens. And I have met people who went there in my cousin's time before his wife died and he shut himself up. Nobody has seen the place since; nobody at all."

"I beg your pardon, I have," said Calthorp, readjusting his eyeglass.

"You!"

"No other. Only the island and the outside of the house, and the——"

"Oh, anybody can see that."

"No they can't; unless they climb a ten-foot wall."

"What do you mean?"

"The whole of the park is enclosed by a stone wall. There are five or six gates, and they are always kept locked. The lake is in the middle of the park and the island is in the middle of the lake, and the house is in the middle of the island. I don't know what is in the middle of the house, because I haven't been there. But I have stood on the shore of Northwaite Lake and seen the house and the terraces and the cascade, and I tell you candidly that, although I was at the unimpressible age of ten, I have never forgotten it."

"How did you get there?"

"We were staying with an uncle of mine near Penrith, and I believe Sir Roderick sent for my father. I remember his saying to me, 'I'm going to show you the most beautiful

house in England.' We went to Keswick by train. There was a carriage waiting for us at the station. I remember the coachman looking at me as if he didn't quite know what sort of a reptile I was, but he didn't say anything, so I got to the gates of the park safely after a long drive. There they tried to stop me, but my father shook his beard at them, and they let me through. When we got down to the lake, where the stables and the landing stage are, there was this fellow Martin, who is a sort of secretary as well as valet to Sir Roderick, waiting with a boat and two men to row it. He wasn't going to let me any further, and nothing would induce him to. He struck me as a most disagreeable fellow. All he could do for me was to give me permission to walk about the woods. But I wasn't to show myself from the house. I made the best of my time. It was in May. I got five different sorts of eggs and tore my trousers in four places. At last, when I got up near the top of a high tree, I saw the whole thing. I was so struck with it I nearly fell down again."

"What was it like?"

"Well, I've never been to the Garden of Eden, but we had a coloured photograph of it in our Family Bible. It was a good deal better than that. However, you'll see it yourself in an hour or two's time, and I'll save my descriptive powers, which are meagre, for somebody else, when I have refreshed my memory."

The pair of them dined together as the train rattled away from Preston, and in due course arrived at Penrith. Here they changed, and had another half-hour's journey in a local train to Keswick. Both of them were silent. Now that they were getting near their journey's end, it was inevitable that the place they were bound for should present itself to their imagination, not as an enchanted palace of sunny pleasure, but as the house of mourning and death.

They alighted at Keswick. A footman with powdered hair came up to meet them on the platform and led the way to an old-fashioned carriage, upon the box of which reigned a coachman of great age and girth, wearing a wig. Guy cast a glance at the horses and then looked up in amaze at the mighty coachman. A shade of mottled red suffused that functionary's face. He bent down from his high seat, his hat in his hand. "They was the best I could

do, Sir Guy," he said in the husky voice of asthmatic old age. "Sir Roderick hasn't used a carriage for five and twenty years."

Guy and Calthorp got into the carriage, the footman clambered up beside the old coachman, and the plebeian horses, which, in spite of silver fitted harness, looked like nothing but what they were, members of the equine proletariat, set out at a fair pace on their ten mile drive.

They went through the town and round the head of Derwentwater. The road lay for some distance alongside the lake, and then turned to pierce into the heart of the glooming hills. It was nearly ten o'clock when they lost their final view of the water, lying now far below them. The dark woods crept down to the lake, a dead-level floor of steely slate broken by tree-covered islets. The hills behind them stood up against the sky like gigantic pieces of stage scenery, their features lost in a haze of deep purple, with only the sharp line of their summits to distinguish them from masses of heavy cloud. As the carriage penetrated further into the recesses of the hills the road grew heavier. The white-washed cottages and farm-houses with their roofs of stone slabs and the roses clambering up the eaves became more rare, until they ceased altogether, and only the indistinct form of white scurrying sheep amongst the young bracken by the roadside served to redeem the complete loneliness of the gloomy fells.

By-and-bye, after a long silence, during which each of the young men had been immersed in his private thoughts, the road took a sharp turn down-hill. Night had now set in, but there was a rising moon. The tinkle of running water was heard and a little wood loomed up by the roadside and gave place to a line of low cottages. Calthorp roused himself. "I remember this," he said. "We are coming to Northwaite, and shall soon reach the wall of the park."

The coachman jammed on the brake, and the heavy carriage slid screaming down a steep loose road. The brake was taken off again, and they rolled smartly through a fair-sized village. Lights shone in windows and open doorways, and people stood in little knots to see them drive by. Soon after they had got clear of the houses the road took a sudden turn to the left and ran alongside the high wall of which Calthorp had spoken, and finally turned

with a fine sweep between two massive gates standing wide open by a low stone lodge. The brake was put on preparatory to another steep dip, and the carriage plunged into the darkness of a thick wood, but soon emerged, and they saw stretched beneath them the moon-silvered lake, its shores muffled in foliage, and rising in its centre an island, larger than any of those on Derwentwater, of which they could see nothing more than the steep thickly wooded side nearest them.

"The house is on the top behind the trees," said Calthorp, as the brake was put on for the last time and the carriage grumbled its way down to the shore.

The road ended in a great cobbled square, on either side of which was a wall with stables and out-buildings behind it. A boat was lying moored to a stone jetty, and two men stood beside it ready to row them across to the island.

"I wonder why Martin isn't here," said Calthorp, as he and Guy alighted from the carriage.

"The place doesn't belong to Martin," said Guy, a little testily.

They took their seats in the stern of the boat. Lights gleamed from the buildings on the bank of the lake. Two grooms came out with a cheerful bustle to attend to the plebeian horses, while the fat coachman rolled heavily off the box and the footman waited for the luggage cart which was rattling down the hill above the landing stage. The boat floated out across the water away from the lights and the voices towards the hidden house on the dark hill.

"When we get round the corner you will see," said Calthorp, in a low voice.

The men were rowing obliquely towards a wooded spur on the south of the island. The water was evidently deep here, for they rowed within an oar's length of the bank, under the very branches of the overhanging trees. As they came out once more into the open Guy uttered an exclamation of surprise and delight.

The boat was in a deep recessed bay, shut in on the west by just such another tree-crowned cape as the one they had rounded. High up on the very summit of the island, but guarded on east and west by deep lines of huge trees, stood a noble house of white stone, its long lines of windows gleaming coldly in the moonlight. Terrace after terrace, their lines broken by tall cypresses and their mas-

sive balustrades wreathed in foliage, led the eye down to the waters of the lake, sweeping out to the whole width of the bay, and ending in a flight of shallow steps which lost themselves in the line of the water. In the middle of this gigantic staircase, rising from some indistinguishable fountain below the topmost terrace, fell a cataract of water, bounded by a curved and involuted balustrade, broadening here and there into a many-fountained pool and narrowing again into a gleaming channel, until it took its final plunge into the waters of the lake from a ledge fifty feet above them. The same thing may be seen in the gardens of some old Italian palace, but hardly on a scale of such magnificence. In the white moonlight, from this hill and wood-encircled lake, the effect was indescribable. The place looked like some unexpected fairy palace, and the owner of all this enchanting beauty now saw it for the first time.

The boat glided up to the marble steps and pushed off again into the shade of the trees after the two young men had got out. They saw it round the little cape on its way back to the shore as they reached the first terrace. The night was scented with flowers. Roses and clematis and honeysuckle smothered the stone balustrades with luxuriant growth. Long lines of stately lilies, more roses, and a profusion of June blossoming flowers bordered the terraces. The water plashed incessantly down its stone stairway, and the fountains played in their flower-bordered pools.

"It is more beautiful than anything I have ever seen," said Guy, as the two young men stood at last on the topmost terrace and looked down on the waters of the lake.

They turned towards the house. The hall-door was wide open, and the dark figures of half a dozen men stood against the bright light within. They were received by a white-haired butler, who bowed low to his new master. Two footmen relieved them of their coats and hats. They might have been entering the hall of a big London house instead of the home of a lonely recluse.

"Will you please step this way, Sir Guy?" said the butler. The two young men followed him into a room on the left of the hall.

CHAPTER V

AT THE END OF THE JOURNEY

THE old butler shut the door behind him, and turned to the young men. His face was white, and his hands shaking. He had a difficulty in speaking, and his voice made a gulping sound in his throat as he tried to bring out his words.

"I've kept it from them all," he managed to stammer out at last. "No one knows but me and one other. I kept it from them till you came."

They stared at him in consternation, but Calthorp almost instantly collected himself. The lines of his face set themselves. He looked both keen and capable.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "What has happened?"

"Sir Roderick has gone," said the butler.

"Yes, I know," replied Calthorp quietly, in the tone which one uses towards a child. "Martin sent a wire to my firm last night. Where is Martin?"

"Martin has gone too," said the old butler, "and one of the gardeners. I don't mean they are dead," he explained. "Sir Roderick died yesterday afternoon. His body is gone; and Martin and the gardener are gone too."

Calthorp took his seat at a writing-table and dipped a pen in the ink. "Sit down," he said to Guy. "And you had better sit down, Mr.—Mr. Feltham. Thank you. I don't wonder you are upset. Now, tell us all about it, and take your time. First of all, when did Sir Roderick die?"

"About a quarter past three o'clock yesterday afternoon, sir," said the old butler. Calthorp's authoritative air seemed to quiet his agitation, and he replied to the cross-examination which followed concisely and clearly.

"A quarter past three. Who sent the telegram to my firm announcing his death?"

"Martin got himself rowed over to Morthwaite about seven o'clock. He told me he was going to wire to you, sir."

"Did he usually go on that sort of errand himself?"

"No, sir; and I thought it a little queer when he told me."

"How long had Sir Roderick been ill?"

"A matter of four days, sir."

"What was the nature of his illness?"

"He caught a chill, sir, sitting out on the terrace on Sunday night. Martin had gone to London the day before. We didn't know what to do. I wanted to send for the doctor the next morning, but Sir Roderick wouldn't have it, and he wouldn't stay in bed. In the evening he was very bad and sent a groom over to Keswick to fetch back the doctor, then and there. He came the next morning."

"Who was the doctor?"

"Dr. Mellish, sir. A highly respected gentleman. He had attended the servants in the house for many years. Sir Roderick had never been ill before within my recollection."

"Did Dr. Mellish attend him until his death?"

"He never left the house, sir, till the end came, and was in the room when Sir Roderick died."

"Who else was in the room?"

"I was, sir, and Mrs. Cheetham, the housekeeper, and Gibbs, the coachman, and Martin. Martin had come back the night before, but Sir Roderick had never recognised him. We were all very old servants, sir, and was here before her ladyship died."

The old man showed signs of emotion.

"Wait a minute," said Calthorp, and made notes on a sheet of paper till he had recovered himself. "Did Dr. Mellish sign a certificate of death?" he asked.

"He told Martin, sir, that he would post it on when he got back to Keswick. He hadn't a form with him. I've got the letter here, sir. I know Dr. Mellish's writing, and his notepaper."

Calthorp took the proffered envelope and turned it over.

"You have no doubt whatever that this is from Dr. Mellish?" he asked.

"No, sir, none."

"I will open it," Calthorp said to Guy. He did so, and glanced over the paper it contained. "Pneumonia, 3.15," he said, and laid the paper aside.

"Now when did you first find out that Sir Roderick's body had disappeared?" he asked, turning again to the butler.

"It was about nine o'clock this morning, sir. I had occasion to consult Martin about some arrangements and went to his room. It was empty, and the bed had not been slept in. I thought he might be in Sir Roderick's dressing-room, and I went there. Then I opened the door gently into the big bedroom, for I thought I would like to look at my old master again, sir, and my 'eart gave a leap, and I turned giddy for a moment. The bed was all tumbled, and the flowers that we'd laid about it the night before, sir, was scattered on the floor, and—and Sir Roderick wasn't there."

"What did you do then?"

"I sat down for a minute till I could take it in, sir; then I locked the door, and put the key in my pocket, and set out to find Martin. I went all over the house, but I couldn't find him. Then I went to his room again, and I found most of his clothes was gone; so then I knew that he'd gone for good."

"How did you manage to keep the news from the other servants?"

"I had to tell Mrs. Cheetham, sir. She and Martin and I was accustomed to breakfast in the Room, sir, and I had to tell her why he didn't come. She went upstairs with me and saw what I said, and we laid our heads together, sir, and gave it out that Martin was gone to meet you at Keswick, and so we kept the truth to ourselves till you came. Later on in the morning we heard that this young gardener—James Braithwaite his name was, sir—hadn't been home all night. He lives with his old grandmother up at Morthwaite. And Mrs. Cheetham and I put two and two together; but no one else knows anything but that."

"Can you tell me anything about this gardener?"

"He's worked on the place since he was a boy, sir. He'd likely be thirty now. He always kept to himself, and was never liked. They do say he drinks, but I've never seen him the worse for liquor, and, to my mind, it's only idle gossip, made up because he's never gone with the other lads and lasses."

"Did you see Martin talking to him after Sir Roderick was taken ill?"

"He rowed him over in the boat, sir, to take the telegram. But there was nothing in that. He was one of those whose place it was to look after the boats."

Calthorp sat for a short time with his eyes bent on the paper before him.

"Well, Mr. Feltham," he said, "I don't think you could have behaved more sensibly than you have done. But we can't keep this startling piece of news to ourselves any longer. Martin hasn't come back with us, and the servants will soon be asking questions. I should be much surprised if they have not begun to ask them already. Don't say anything just yet. Sir Guy and I must talk it over. I think you may go now."

The old butler rose from his seat. He looked towards Guy, who had sat silent throughout the interview.

"Ah, Sir Guy," he said, tremulously, "it would have been a very different welcome to Merrilees, in spite of our old master's death, if this awful thing hadn't happened."

Guy rose, and shook the old man's hand, but said nothing.

"There's supper laid in the dining-room, gentlemen," said the butler, with a slight return to his professional manner.

"We will come in a minute," said Calthorp, who was still writing at the table.

"Good God!" exclaimed Guy when they were left alone. "What does it all mean?"

"Blackmail," replied Calthorp, shortly. "Martin and the gardener are in it. They have carried off the body, and are holding it for ransom."

"The blackguards!" said Guy. "What can we do?"

"Set Scotland Yard to work, and in the meantime make a search on our own account. My impression is that they must have hidden the body either on the island or in the woods round the lake. If they had got through one of the gates they would have been seen. We had better set the men in the house to work to-night. There seem to be plenty of them. We will offer a reward. A hundred pounds, I think."

"Very well," said Guy. "And I suppose you will tell them all what has happened?"

"We couldn't keep it dark if we wanted to. But you had better do the talking. Let us have some supper, and

then tell Feltham to call the household together. You must make them a short speech—feelings of horror at discovery, detestation of crime, keenness to track criminals, anxiety to afford respect to remains of late head of house. Do it as well as you can. You reign here now, and must make a good impression. I'll stand down for the time being. But I'll lay my hands on that fellow Martin before I'm much older."

Underneath the flippancy of his speech there was an air of resolution in Calthorp's bearing which impressed Guy.

"It is a horrible business to come into," he said. "I'm jolly glad I've got you with me, Dick."

Calthorp gathered up his notes and put them in his pocket. "Let us go and take a little light refreshment," he said.

They found the old butler and two footmen awaiting them at the door of the dining-room. It was a room of noble proportions, panelled in oak, with a ceiling of moulded plaster. A few pictures hung on the walls. On either side of the great open fireplace were the portraits of Sir Roderick and his wife, the former painted thirty years before by Millais. It represented a young man of commanding presence, with a fine head, dark searching eyes, and a firm clean mouth. It was a face not easily forgotten. In spite of its youth there was great force and will in its lines; and the powerful mind of a leader of men shone through the eyes with an unmistakable meaning. It was almost inconceivable that such a man should have condemned himself to a life of hermit loneliness. The picture of Sir Roderick's wife was that of a most beautiful young girl. It was by an unknown Italian artist, but worthy for all that to hang side by side with the other. Over the massive oak buffet at the end of the room was Romney's painting of Sir Michael, a thin-faced melancholy man with great dark eyes. He was the baronet who had built the house and the terraces and spent the whole of his fortune over his costly whim. Guy had possessed himself of engravings of the pictures of Sir Michael and Sir Roderick, but he now saw the originals for the first time. He recognised also the portrait of his great-uncle, Sir Michael the second, who had never been able to live in the lordly pleasure-house that Sir Michael the first had reared for himself. The other portraits in the room were of no

great artistic merit. They went back to Sir Roderick, the first baronet of the reign of James II.

The two men talked very little while the servants were in the room. The supper was beautifully served, the wines were of the best, and the old silver and the glass and the china on the table gave pleasure to Guy's artistic eye, even in the midst of the confusion of mind caused by the startling story they had just heard. Evidently Sir Roderick in his retirement had not denied himself the luxuries or even the magnificences of life. The footmen retired at last, and the old butler put the wine on the table.

Calthorp threw a glance at Guy, who said to the butler, "Call all the servants together in the hall, Feltham. I must tell them what has happened, and what we are going to do."

Going out five minutes later, they found a small army of men and women grouped together at the end of the hall. There seemed to be more of them than was warranted by the size of the house, big as it was, certainly more than could have been necessary to provide for the necessities of one lonely man. On the edge of the group sat a little old lady in a dress of black satin and a lace cap. Something impelled Guy to go up and shake hands with her, which afforded the old lady tearful gratification, and seemed to impress the assembled company. The old lady looked much shaken, and there was an air of expectancy on the faces of the group which betokened that a hint of something unusual had got about among them.

Guy took his place behind a table which stood in the middle of the hall between himself and the group of servants. Calthorp sat down near him.

"I am among you for the first time," Guy said, "as the successor to your old master, whose loss I am sure you all deplore. But I should not have called you together just now unless I had had something very serious to communicate to you, something which I only learnt half an hour ago on first coming to this house. I am told that the body of Sir Roderick Bertram has been taken away from the room in which it lay, and from the house."

A gasp and a rustle of astonishment ran through the assembled group. Eye was turned to eye, and in some of them surmise and calculation began to work.

"As most of you by this time probably know," con-

tinued Guy, "Martin, Sir Roderick's valet, and one of the gardeners, Braithwaite, have not been seen about the place since last night. It is impossible to avoid connecting their disappearance with that of Sir Roderick's body. It is impossible also to come to any other conclusion but that the motive of this base crime is to extort money for the recovery of the body. As to that we shall know later, and I shall spare no pains to bring the culprits to punishment. But, although these men have apparently got clear away, it is practically certain that they cannot have carried the body away with them. I am told that a high wall runs all round the park, and that it would be impossible to get through any of the gates without the lodge-keepers' knowledge. It follows, therefore, that the body must have been hidden either on this island, or somewhere on the mainland within the circle of the walls, and what we have to do is to make a diligent search for it, so that we can afford honourable burial to the remains of one whose memory we all respect, I no less than you, although you knew him and I did not. My friend and legal adviser, Mr. Calthorp, will organise the search, and I offer a reward of a hundred pounds to whatever person is successful in it. I should like it to begin *at once*."

These last words were said in a voice slightly raised, and there was an instant stir of excitement and resolution among the men. Calthorp rose and stood beside Guy.

"Very good indeed," he said as the group of servants broke up and filed out of the hall. The two young men, the housekeeper, and the butler were left alone.

"Everything in the house must give way until we find what we are looking for," said Guy. "Mr. Calthorp and I can do without elaborate meals, Feltham, and the men must be left as free as possible to do what they can. Some of them must search the island to-night, and to-morrow morning we will get what help we can from the other side and extend our ground. This must be a distressing blow to you, Mrs. Cheetham," he said to the old housekeeper, who still sat in her high-backed chair, quietly sobbing.

The old lady looked up at him.

"It's a trouble, and it's a mystery, Sir Guy," she said. "I don't think what you all think."

The old butler pursed his lips.

"She won't have it that Martin stole the body, sir," he

said, " though I tell her you can't shut your eyes to such facts as we've got."

" Perhaps you will tell us what you think to-morrow morning, Mrs. Cheetham," said Calthorp. " You look too tired to go through more to-night. You had better get to bed," he said to Guy when the housekeeper had left them. " I am just going out to set the men to work. We can leave the rest till to-morrow."

" I haven't got the brains to do any more to-night," said Guy ; and indeed the thronging surprises and events of the day had made him ready to drop with fatigue, though Calthorp looked as keen and resourceful as when he had entered his office in London fifteen hours before.

So the search began, and all through the summer night lights twinkled among the trees of the island, and voices called to one another.

CHAPTER VI

MRS. CHEETHAM'S THEORY

GUY slept dreamlessly and awoke the next morning to find the sun streaming into his room and old Feltham stropping his razors at the dressing table.

"Half past seven, Sir Guy," he said. "There's nought been found yet, sir, but Mr. Calthorp has been up this last hour and gone over to the other side."

Guy sprang out of bed, all his fatigue slept off, and stood at the open window as Feltham closed the door behind him. It was a glorious sight that met his eyes. The wide gardens, the flower-laden terraces, the glittering cascade, and the blown spray from the spouting fountains lay beneath him, and, spread out like a carpet of silver, the lake gleamed in the sun, hemmed in by the dark sloping woodlands and the purple hills beyond. What the scene lacked of moonlit mystery it gained tenfold by the riotous profusion of blossom and colour and the exhilarating freshness of the June morning. The horror of the previous night was gone, and its place taken by an impatient longing to have this disagreeable mystery cleared up, so that the dead should no longer have power to keep from the living the full enjoyment of ceded rights. The search must, of course, be diligently carried out, but there were other things to think about and settle, and Guy thought much of the future and what should come after this gloomy disturbance should be cleared away as he dressed quickly, with half an eye ever on the entrancing scene framed by the open window.

He found Calthorp waiting for him in the breakfast parlour, a room on the north side of the house, looking through latticed windows on to a yew-enclosed Dutch garden. After the sunshine on gleaming water and tossing roses the outlook was depressing, and Calthorp's face, as he bade him a grave "Good-morning," did little to warm the solemn chill.

"No luck," said Calthorp, shortly, as a footman with tired eyes brought in the silver dishes; "but I've set them to work on the other side. Something ought to happen in the course of the day. We shall have to interview some more people after breakfast. You've sent for the other lodge-keepers, have you?" he asked the footman.

"Yes, sir; they will be here at nine o'clock."

"I may as well tell you at once," said Calthorp, when the servant had left the room, "that I have received a disturbing piece of news this morning. It may throw an altogether different light on this affair."

"What is it?" asked Guy.

"I've had a wire from Sir Roderick's stockbrokers in answer to my letter of yesterday. Here it is."

Guy took the proffered telegram. "Sir Roderick Bertram," it ran, "sold out last securities in our hands six months ago. Has purchased none through us since. Letter follows. Temple, Quality."

"What does it mean?" asked Guy, in utter amazement.

"We shall know more when the letter comes," said Calthorp, "which will be at two o'clock. In the meantime I don't know."

"But what can it mean? Haven't you formed any theories?"

"Yes, my dear Watson, I have," replied Calthorp, cracking an egg. "But, like Sherlock Holmes, whom I am said to resemble, I prefer to keep them to myself until I am sure they are right. You will then have them in the fullest detail, whether you wish it or no."

"I wish you'd be serious, Dick. Do you think he can possibly have got rid of all that enormous amount of property?"

"Come now, Watson," said Calthorp, "you shall propound your own theories, and I will scoff at them. What could he have done?"

"He might have reinvested through another firm."

"Quite so. But why should he? Messrs. Temple and Quality are a firm of the highest repute, and I happen to know that old Mr. Temple and Sir Roderick were friends in their youth. Why should he have gone to another stockbroker? Besides, if he had they would probably have mentioned the name of the other firm. Try again, Watson."

"He might have had some outside scheme in which he was interested."

"Not bad. But remember that his income can never have been less than forty or fifty thousand a year, and must lately have been a great deal more. What scheme could any man get rid of over a million on that all the world isn't sure to hear of? That won't do."

"Perhaps he turned all his property into golden sovereigns and threw them into the lake."

"Perhaps he did. In that case we will drag the lake. We shall probably have to drag it in any case. But I don't think he did that. I will be generous to you, Watson, and give you two words, which you may write upon the tables of your heart until the time comes to produce them. Portable property. Now I've gone a good deal further than I should by all the rules of the game, and I shall say no more."

"Portable property!" echoed Guy. "And you think Martin has gone off with it?"

"Look here, Watson, don't you say anything sensible!" said Calthorp. "That isn't your *rôle*. Now I am going to ring and ask them to tell Mrs. Cheetham to come here. 'Step this way' is, I believe, the proper expression." And he did solemnly tell the servant who answered the bell to "ask Mrs. Cheetham kindly to step this way."

Mrs. Cheetham made her appearance with no delay, and, accommodated with a seat, was asked to explain her ideas as to the disappearance of Martin. Her agitation of the previous night had left her, and she seemed a very self-possessed and capable old lady.

She scorned the idea that Martin would have stolen the body of his master for the purpose of levying blackmail.

"I've lived in this house with Robert Martin for thirty years, sir," she said. "He was devoted to Sir Roderick's service. There was nothing he wouldn't have done for him. To think of him dishonouring his master's corpse! I wouldn't believe it not if I were to see it with my own eyes."

"But there's Feltham," said Guy. "He has been here as long as you have, hasn't he? He has no difficulty in believing it."

The old lady drew her lips together. "I shouldn't be the one to say a word against Mr. Feltham," she said

"To my remembrance I've never had a cross word from him all the time we've been in service here together, and I couldn't say the same of Martin. But it isn't difficult to believe, Sir Guy, that two men in the positions in the house that they filled should be a bit jealous of one another. Feltham was born and bred on the estate, and was in service here when Sir Roderick was born. Martin was Sir Roderick's man in London, before ever he came in for Merrilees, and ever since my lady died has been getting more and more in with Sir Roderick. Feltham felt that he was in the second place, when, perhaps, he ought to have been in the first, and he hasn't felt over-friendly to Martin, I know, though I'm far from saying that there was bad blood between them, or that he'd say a thing of Martin if he didn't believe it. But he'd believe more than I should by a good deal."

"What sort of a man was Martin?" asked Calthorp.

"A masterful man, sir," said Mrs. Cheetham, decisively, "and a man that kept his own counsel. I've known him for all these years, but I couldn't tell you in every case what he would do and what he wouldn't do, like I could of Feltham. But there is one thing I know he wouldn't do, and if you will take my word for it, sir, you may save yourself a lot of trouble. He wouldn't be the man I've known for thirty years, in spite of many faults, if he could steal his master's body so as to make money out of it."

"Well, now," said Calthorp, after a short pause, "we have listened to what you have said, and we will give it due weight. What do you think has really happened? Have you formed any opinion in your own mind?"

"I have, sir," said Mrs. Cheetham, quietly.

"We should like you to tell us what it is."

"If you had asked me the question yesterday," said Mrs. Cheetham, "I couldn't have said anything. I was too much upset by the dreadful thing that had happened. But, lying awake all last night as I did, and turning things over in my mind, I got light, and everything became clear." She paused, and seemed to be collecting her thoughts. The two men waited for her in silence.

"You know what made Sir Roderick shut himself up here, sir, going on for twenty-five years ago, and never set his foot outside the park gates from that day to this? It was the death of his young wife and her baby boy. They

were at some place in Italy at the time, and Martin and her ladyship's maid were with them. The mother and child were buried there. Sir Roderick wasn't like a man who would go almost out of his mind with grief at first for a loss like that and then come round and forget all about it. He came home here after he had buried his wife and child, and everything went on as before. Do you know, sir, for five-and-twenty years two places were laid at every meal, and for five-and-twenty years only one of them was filled ? ”

Guy and Calthorp looked at each other in astonishment.

“ Do you know,” continued Mrs. Cheetham, “ that when Sir Roderick came home from Italy not a thing was altered in the household arrangements and not a servant was turned off ? Do you know that her ladyship's rooms upstairs are left just as they were when she used them, as I'll show you, Sir Guy, when you are pleased to go round the house, and that the drawing-rooms and other rooms which have not been used for five-and-twenty years were always kept open and filled with fresh flowers ? Sir Roderick loved his wife, gentlemen, as few men in this world love anybody but themselves. He lived here alone with her memory, as you might say, and it was as fresh with him, poor gentleman, when he lay on his deathbed as it was the day he buried her and his little son.”

“ And you think——” said Calthorp, as the old lady came to another pause.

“ I think,” said Mrs. Cheetham, “ that Sir Roderick gave Martin strict orders that his body was to be taken over to Italy and buried with her ladyship.”

Calthorp sat silent with a frown of consideration on his face.

“ But why all this mystery and secrecy ? ” asked Guy. “ Your theory doesn't explain that, Mrs. Cheetham.”

“ I am aware of that, Sir Guy,” she answered. “ But through living so many years shut up here with Sir Roderick, all I can say is that, however it may seem to a stranger, begging your pardon for calling you so, it doesn't appear to me strange that Sir Roderick should have given orders that it should be carried out like that. And whatever Martin's faults may have been, he would have carried out Sir Roderick's orders to the last letter. You may hear

of him again as likely as not when he's carried out his instructions ; I shouldn't be surprised. But, whether or no, I feel sure in my own mind that, whatever he has done, it was under instructions from Sir Roderick."

Calthorp still retained his thoughtful frown. "What about the gardener, Braithwaite?" he asked.

"Well, sir," said Mrs. Cheetham, "you see, Martin couldn't have done everything by himself. He must have had help. And it is my belief that James Braithwaite was trained up to act with him when occasion should arise. He was just the one that would have been chosen, a young man that made friends with nobody ; and there were many opportunities of Martin's talking with him, and Sir Roderick, too, for that matter, without causing remark, when he was rowing the boat."

"Just answer me one question, Mrs. Cheetham," broke in Calthorp. "Should you say, knowing Sir Roderick as you did both before her ladyship's death and afterwards—should you say that his mind was affected by his loss?"

"I should say, sir," replied the old lady, "that any ideas he had before my lady's death got more firmly fixed in his mind and grew stronger as the years went by, and that he had no more room for new ones. In everything else his mind was as clear as yours, sir."

"Was he gloomy or depressed?"

Mrs. Cheetham smiled, almost laughed. "Never, sir," she said, "not from the first day he came back from abroad. Why, he lived in this house, sir, except that he never saw company, just the same as any gentleman might. We all got so used to it, it made us angry when people outside used to talk as if he was like a curiosity. He'd read his books and his papers—boxes of books would come down from London, and I should think all the papers that's printed ; he'd write for hours in his library, and he took a wonderful interest in his garden. He'd be out of doors in all weathers directing the gardeners. He never hid himself away. He often used to laugh at new servants, who would sometimes be afraid of meeting him, and they would laugh themselves when they had once seen him just like any other gentleman. He would see people on business, though not often *gentlemen* of late years : I will say that ; but with working men and such-like he was just as anybody else. Oh, yes, sir, Sir Roderick may have been

made into a mystery outside, but he wasn't one to them as knew him."

"And yet you said that it would not seem strange to you that he should give orders for the disposal of his body after his death in the way you have suggested," said Calthorp.

"Well, sir, I daresay I have talked too much," said Mrs. Cheetham, "and I'm sure I've talked a long time. In his daily life Sir Roderick was as I have said. In all that had to do with the death of her ladyship he was as I have said, too. You must put the two things together if you can. And now, with your leave, I will go to my duties."

"That's a clever old lady," said Guy, when the door had closed upon her. "What do you think of her theory?"

"It fits the facts as far as we know them," said Calthorp, "but it is just as likely to be wrong as right. We shall be able to test it to some extent when we see the lodge-keepers, which will be in a few minutes. After that, I am going to look through the papers. Feltham says that Sir Roderick did all his business with this fellow Martin, who was more secretary than servant, in the room they call his dressing-room, and all his business papers and books are there. I must go over them, and I have wired to the bank at Keswick asking them to send someone over, so that we shall see how matters stand there. Feltham says that Sir Roderick did all his banking at Keswick, so that we shall have no difficulty in getting at the secret of what has become of the investments."

"What a clever fellow you are, Dick!" said Guy. "You've thought about everything."

"Thank you, Watson," replied Calthorp. "And now for the lodge-keepers!"

The examination of the lodge-keepers elicited one important fact. Each of the five gates leading out of the park was kept locked, and it would have been impossible for anyone to get through them without the assistance of the gate-keepers. In one gateway, however,—that on the north side of the park, and furthest away from the house and lake,—there was a little porter's gate which was kept locked, but to which the servant Martin was known to have the key. The man and his wife who lived in the lodge had not heard anyone go by during the night, but this proved nothing, as they slept at the back of the cottage, and the little gate opened on to the grass of the park and

not on to the road, so that anyone using it could easily have done so without making any noise. This north gate, which led to an unfrequented road, little more than a cart track winding among lonely hills, was hardly ever used, and lay a full mile away from the house. The old butler had forgotten the very existence of the postern gate, and was full of apologies for his oversight.

"It makes very little difference," said Calthorp. "We know that they must have got out of the park somehow, as they are not here; and now we know how they got out. That's all."

"It makes this difference," said Guy, when they were alone again. "We thought they could not have taken the body with them, but now we know they could have done. Mrs. Cheetham's theory seems to fit in."

"How do you suppose," said Calthorp, "that two men are going to carry a dead body a mile to the gate to begin with? They say there are no marks of wheels, and you heard me ask the width of the gate. Nothing with wheels could have got through."

"It is just possible," said Guy, "that they might have carried the body with great difficulty as far as the gate, and had some sort of conveyance waiting for them out of earshot."

"That means accomplices," said Calthorp, "and how could they have got hold of them in the time? At any rate, we shall be able to find out whether a cart did pass down that road last night when we get the police here to make inquiries. The road runs for seven miles without as much as a footpath branching from it, and there are cottages and farmhouses scattered along it at intervals. Somebody must have heard a cart if there was one. That is the way these two rascals must have gone, anyhow; and it is quite possible something may have been seen of them. That is the sort of clue your local constable *can* follow up. It doesn't take much brain power. But there's one thing I'm pretty sure of. We have got to look for Sir Roderick's body inside the park, and for the two men who stole it outside."

"And the blackmail?" asked Guy.

"The demand won't come from Martin. He's playing a bigger game than that. Mr. Braithwaite I am not so sure of. We shall see. Ah, here is the post."

Feltham had brought in a few letters and a pile of daily and weekly papers.

"Temple and Quality," said Calthorp as he broke open an envelope. "Hum! Ha! 'Very shocked to hear of Sir Roderick Bertram's death. One of our oldest clients. Sir Roderick had put all his securities into our hands on succeeding to his mother's property. Personal friend of our Mr. Temple. Told us he should never employ another firm. Frequently gave us instructions in writing to make new purchases and change investments. Showed great judgment. Value of securities eventually little short of a million and a half. Began to sell out about fifteen years ago and never repurchased. Large holding Mount Ophir Gold Mine disposed of last December and account finally closed. No knowledge of any other investments.' Well, that does not take us much further. But you can't make away with a million and a half in fifteen years without leaving something to show for it. Here is a letter for Sir Roderick. We had better open it, I think."

He did so, and they read it together. It ran as follows :

"4, HOSPITAL COURT,

"HATTON GARDEN, W.C.

"TO SIR RODERICK BERTRAM, BART.,

"SIR,—We have at length concluded negotiations with our friends at Calcutta, and have secured a firm offer of 'The King's Jewel' for £34,000, which we shall accept, subject to your approval, that being a thousand pounds less than the sum you authorised us to offer. The negotiations must be kept secret, as the Maharajah has only been induced to sell under great pressure, and is anxious that it shall not become known that he has done so. Our friends have been permitted to examine the Jewel, and are of opinion that if it were broken up the separate stones would fetch 50 per cent. more in the open market than the Maharajah is prepared to accept for the whole. We hope to gain your approval for what we regard as the most satisfactory negotiation we have had the honour of carrying through for you.

"We are, Sir,

"Your obedient Servants,

"ROSENTHAL & Co."

The letter bore the date of the previous day.

"Now we have it," said Calthorp tersely. "You will remember the two words I impressed upon your memory, Watson. Portable property."

Guy looked merely puzzled.

"I see it all now," continued Calthorp. "Sir Roderick is the American Purchaser."

"Do you mind talking plainly?" suggested Guy.

"Not at all. I prefer it. And when I have finished it you will kindly say, 'But, Holmes, this is marvellous!' I shall ask for no other reward. Let me tell you then that for many years past, whenever there has been a great sale of jewels, the best have invariably been bought by a mysterious personage known to the trade as The American Purchaser. No one has ever seen him, and nobody has ever seen the jewels again that he is reported to have bought, either in America or elsewhere. The mystery, I believe, has caused some discussion amongst the diamond merchants and others connected with the purchase of precious stones. Messrs. Rosenthal & Co. seem to have kept their counsel well. I have no manner of doubt that Sir Roderick is the mysterious collector, and has been engaged for the last fifteen years in turning his enormous fortune into the most portable form of portable property."

"But why on earth should he have done that?"

"I don't know. And it doesn't much matter. But I am afraid, very much afraid, that the fact accounts for the disappearance of our friend Martin."

"You think that——"

"He has gone off with them, or as many as he could carry. I fear there is very little doubt of it. However, we shall soon know. What we have got to do now is to find the place where these jewels were kept. I will ring for Feltham."

"Is there a strong room or a big safe anywhere in the house where valuable property could be kept?" Calthorp asked the butler when he appeared.

"Yes, sir," he replied at once. "There is a big safe in the room Martin slept in. It was put in a good many years ago."

"About fifteen years ago?"

"I should think that would be about it, sir."

"Do you know what was kept in it?"

"No, sir; not the silver, for we have a strong room downstairs for that. I don't know what the one upstairs was used for. Martin had the keys of it. But I didn't tell you, sir. All his keys are laid on the table in Sir Roderick's dressing-room."

"You had better take us there, then, and afterwards show us where the safe is."

Feltham led the way up the broad marble staircase, and along a corridor hung with pictures, and full from end to end of old furniture ranged along the walls, French and Indian and Chinese cabinets, Elizabethan chairs, tables and glass cupboards set out with rare china, and all arranged with such skill and taste that nothing looked out of place, and nothing crowded. At the end of the corridor was a heavy mahogany door leading to the west wing, which contained a complete suite of rooms apart from the rest of the house, and approached by a separate staircase.

"These are my lady's rooms," said Feltham, indicating two closed doors on the right. "Sir Roderick's are above. This is the old part of the house. The front only is new, to fit in with the rest."

They mounted another staircase to the second floor, and Feltham opened a door and led them into a large room facing south, its windows closely shuttered. He let in the light and opened one of the windows. The wing was set back from the main front of the house by the width of a stone balcony, which ran along it. The room was half library, half morning-room, and had the air of having been recently occupied. All the furniture was old and rich. In one of the windows stood a large Louis Seize writing-table covered with orderly piles of documents, and near it against the wall was a massive ebony cabinet with numerous drawers and partitions. In the very middle of the writing-table, on the blotting pad, lay a bunch of keys.

"That is Sir Roderick's bedroom," said Feltham in a low voice, pointing to a door in the corner of the room. "Will you go in sir?"

"Not now," said Guy hastily.

"These are the keys," said the old butler. "No one has been in since Mrs. Cheetham and I locked the doors."

Calthorp took the bunch of keys. They were bright, and looked as if they had been in constant use. "Now show us Martin's room and the safe," he said.

Feltham led them through a door at the far end of the corridor, and they found themselves on a little stone landing from which a turret stair led both up and down. The walls were of great thickness, and were pierced with lancet windows. "This is the oldest part of the house," he said. Then he took them through another door into an oak-panelled passage and down a step into a dark room on the left. It was furnished as a bedroom, and on one side of it part of the panelling had been removed, and in its place stared the ugly fronts of two great green-painted doors with brass handles.

"You may go now, Feltham," said Calthorp. "Sir Guy and I are going to look into the safe, if the key is here, and afterwards I am going to examine the papers in the dressing room. You will find me there if anybody comes."

The butler took his departure and closed the door behind him. "Now for the key of the mystery!" said Calthorp.

He hit upon the right key almost at once, turned it in the lock, and twisted the brass handle. The great door swung slowly open.

The safe was filled with tiers of baize-lined shelves. They were absolutely empty.

CHAPTER VII

MR. PHIPP EXPLAINS

THE two young men looked at each other.

"It is only what we expected," said Calthorp, shortly.

"Yes, but it's devilish awkward," said Guy. "According to what we have learnt, this safe contained the whole of my cousin's fortune, and it has all disappeared. What am I to do?"

"We shall get it back," said Calthorp, confidently. "I don't suppose Martin has walked off with a million and a half's worth of precious stones for the pleasure of looking at them. Directly he tries to dispose of any of them we shall nab him, if we don't nab him before. And after all it isn't so bad as it might be, Guy. We know there are thirty-four thousand pounds at least—thirty-five, because Sir Roderick was prepared to pay that for the jewel Rosenthals wrote about; and there must be some more. You must remember that this place had to be kept up anyhow, and whatever he has done with the bulk of his fortune he must have left himself enough for that. He was not an old man—some years short of sixty—and he cannot have expected to die just yet. He seems to have had perfect health. And you've got this house. The things in it alone, from what I can see, must be worth a fortune."

Guy turned away.

"It is an extraordinary state of things," he said. "I wonder if anything like it has ever happened before?"

"I should say not. Now I'm going through the books and papers in the dressing room. You might run out and play for a bit. I'll let you know if anything turns up."

Guy went downstairs and out into the bright sunlight with a feeling of relief at being able to throw off for a time the incubus of gloom and mystery which pervaded the house. Calthorp, using his busy brain upstairs, would surely be able to extract some comfort from the papers he was examining. Calthorp inspired confidence, and it was impossible to move about such a house as this, every corner

apparently crammed with objects of worth and beauty, or to wander through these gardens of Paradise, without a conviction that it was impossible for Martin or anyone else, whatever their intentions, to carry away with them the means of supplying the arteries of such a place with life.

The terraces and fountains he left to make fuller acquaintance with on another occasion, and explored the rest of the island. The woods which clothed the steep bank on the east and sheltered the house from view of the shore had been cleared away to a great extent over the rest of the island, which must have covered forty or fifty acres. On the south-eastern spur, which sloped more gently to the water, they had been left with broad grass paths winding through them, and rhododendrons and other flowering shrubs planted among the trees, while the ground was carpeted with foxgloves and groups of woodland flowers, of which Guy dimly perceived that, although the effect was that of careless nature, the beauty of colour and grouping was that of finished art.

Behind the house was the Dutch garden, with a broad opening in the yew hedge leading on to a great level lawn with a noble group of cedars at the further end. On the west was a stone wall standing deep in a brilliant border of hardy flowers, with a creeper-covered gateway leading to enclosed kitchen gardens, and lower down, near the water, what amounted almost to a little hamlet of gardeners' cottages, outbuildings, and glass-houses. The lawn melted almost imperceptibly through pierced belts of shrubs and a line of noble trees into a wilderness of wild beauty. Broad mown paths wound like rivers down the undulating ground to the lake, amongst rough grass filled with great groups of free-growing flowers and planted with every imaginable rare and beautiful tree and shrub that would flourish in this mild northern climate. Some of them had attained to a great height, and all of them looked as if they had chosen that one particular place to grow in and no other. New surprises of contrast and colour came at every turn. The whole wild garden was a masterpiece of art inspired by nature. In one place there was a little lake, studded with water-lilies and bordered with iris, a tiny island, and a little willow-shaded bridge. Below the lake there was a sudden entrance to a sunk rock

garden, filled and curtained with flowers and ferns ; below that a stone summer house, backed by a crescent of trees, looking over a little lawn-bordered bay to the woods on the opposite shore. It would be impossible to describe the beauties of that island garden, and after wandering over it for an hour Guy felt that he had only gained a mere impression of its glories. But coming at last to the south terrace, he was hailed by Calthorp from the hall doorway, and turned with a sigh to take up once more the problems of the immediate future.

"Mr. Phipp, the bank manager, has just come," said Calthorp, and led the way into the room which they had first entered the evening before. It was a sort of ante-room to the great library, which extended all along the front of the house to the east of the hall.

Mr. Phipp proved to be a round-faced, pink-cheeked little man, who made valiant efforts to accommodate his indomitable cheerfulness to the exigencies of the situation. He was dressed in black from top to toe, and looked like a cherub in mourning.

"Very dreadful occurrence this, gentlemen," he said when Guy and Calthorp had introduced themselves. "Very shocking. It has cast a gloom over the neighb'r'ood, I assure you, a positive gloom."

Mr. Phipp said this with his head on one side and an enquiring expression in his eye, like one who hazards a subtle pleasantry.

"You have the news at Keswick?" inquired Calthorp.

"We woke up to it this morning," said Mr. Phipp. "The neighb'r'ood is in a bustle about it, I assure you, a positive bustle. A gloomy bustle, of course," he added in explanation. "It has shocked us excessively, positively horrified us. Are the jewels safe, gentlemen?"

This inquiry was made in a confidential whisper, and followed the expression of Mr. Phipp's horror without any intermediate pause.

"The jewels have gone," replied Calthorp.

"I said so," said Mr. Phipp, nodding his head with a knowing air. "I said so coming along. Not out loud, because of the groom, but I said so."

"Is the story of the jewels common property about here?" asked Calthorp.

"Not a soul knows of it but myself," replied Mr. Phipp,

"not a single living soul, sir—except Mrs. Phipp—my wife, gentlemen."

Mr. Phipp waved a hand as if making an actual introduction. Calthorp bowed gravely.

"Will you kindly tell us," he said, "how you came to know about the jewels, and how matters stand with regard to Sir Roderick's banking account?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Phipp, producing a doubled sheet of foolscap paper from his breast coat pocket and unfolding it. "I have all the figures here. You shall have the whole story from the beginning, gentlemen."

"Sir Roderick has always banked with you, I think," said Calthorp.

"He has banked exclusively with us for a little over twenty-four years," replied Mr. Phipp. "And I have had the honour of managing the Keswick branch of our bank for the whole of that period. Perhaps I shall be betraying no confidence, gentlemen, if I say that it was owing to the request of Sir Roderick, whose transactions with us have been large, that I have been continued in this position—at some increase of personal emolument—instead of being advanced to a more important branch."

"He made that request to your directors, I suppose?" said Calthorp.

"That was it, sir, that was it," replied Mr. Phipp, with amazing cheerfulness, apparently rejoiced at being so promptly understood. "It was about fifteen years ago when—when—— But perhaps I had better begin at the beginning."

The bird-like lift of the little round head invited toleration. "I can do it so much better in my own way," it seemed to say. Calthorp nodded.

"Sir Roderick transferred his account to us from his London bank," said Mr. Phipp, "when he first, if I may use the expression, bottled himself up here. I should, perhaps, say, immured himself within these walls. That was, on the twenty-eighth of March, twenty-four years ago. I had just been appointed manager of the branch, and the transaction was naturally a somewhat important one. The balance in our hands has never been less than five thousand pounds, and very large sums indeed have passed through our books. For ten years, gentlemen, I never saw Sir Roderick. Any personal business that re-

quired to be done was effected by Martin, his confidential servant, who always seemed to me, if I may be allowed to say so, a man who held himself aloof from the—the more expansive moods of human intercourse.”

“Secretive?” suggested Calthorp.

Mr. Phipp balanced the adjective.

“Not perhaps precisely that,” he said; “but—well, I will give you an instance. Mrs. Phipp—my wife, gentlemen—having the natural curiosity of her sex—a perfectly amiable and innocent curiosity—and being interested in Sir Roderick—what woman, knowing his story, would not?—Mrs. Phipp asked me to invite Martin to share our mid-day meal with us, some day when he should be over, and the circumstances of housekeeping should permit of it. Our dwelling-place is over the offices of the bank, and the invitation would not seem an unnatural one, and Martin was hardly a servant in the sense that our own two domestics, for instance, are servants. We could entertain him without derogating from the respect due to us. Well, to cut a long story short, I advanced the invitation on a certain occasion. The reply I received was, ‘Thank you, Mr. Phipp, I came here on business. We’ll confine ourselves to business, if it’s all the same to you.’ Now, was that friendly, gentlemen? Was it courteous?”

Guy and Calthorp made haste to agree that it was neither. Mr. Phipp put behind him the painful memory of his rejected hospitality.

“Well, that was Martin,” he said, with a brisker air, “and we need not concern ourselves any further with him for the present. I may say then that matters went on in the usual way for about ten years. The income from Sir Roderick’s investments was paid in regularly to his account with us. It was something like forty thousand a year to begin with, but even that large sum soon began to increase, because Sir Roderick only spent about half of it, and the rest he invested.”

“How on earth could he manage to spend twenty thousand a year in the way he lived here?” asked Guy.

“The greater part of it, I think, went in purchases,” said Mr. Phipp. “Rare books, furniture, pictures, what the French call *objy dar*, and so forth.”

“That is so,” said Calthorp. “All the figures are in the books which I have been examining upstairs.”

"Ah, then you know," said Mr. Phipp. "Yes, Sir Roderick was a great buyer of *objy dar*. He did it all through Martin, who was constantly going to London to attend sales, and so forth. Martin was authorised to draw on Sir Roderick's account—a most unusual proceeding for a servant, I should say, for, after all, in spite of the airs he gave himself, Martin *was* nothing more than a servant—and all the payments were made with cheques signed by him. Then we paid a very considerable amount of ready money to Martin over the counter—gold, never notes. Part of it, no doubt, went to wages and household expenses, but that could not account for all. I should say that over and above such sums as would be necessary for current expenses there must have been something getting on for a thousand pounds a year drawn in this way. Whether Sir Roderick knew of this or not I don't know, but——"

"It is all in the books upstairs," said Calthorp.

"Oh," said Mr. Phipp with an air of slight disappointment. "Then to that extent I have done Martin an injustice. I thought he had taken it. But it was not my business to say anything, as he had Sir Roderick's authority to draw. Well, now, I come to a date fourteen years ago last February. There came a letter to me at the bank one morning from Martin, requesting my attendance on Sir Roderick forthwith. I was somewhat excited over this unusual summons, and so, if I may say so, was Mrs. Phipp. I came over at once, was met by Martin at the landing stage, and brought into this very room. Coming over in the boat Martin said, 'Sir Roderick has sent for you to give you a piece of information about an investment he has decided to make. There is no need to make a fuss about it. Take his instructions and then go away.' I am pleased to say, gentlemen (here Mr. Phipp's happy face expanded with a twinkling smile), that it came into my mind to reply, 'Thank you, Martin; my business is with your master. We shall carry it out in our own way, and I have no idea of taking instructions on the subject from a servant!'"

"What did he say to that?" asked Guy.

"Oh, I didn't actually bring out the repartee at the time," replied Mr. Phipp. "It would not have been politic. And part of it occurred to me afterwards in con-

sultation with Mrs. Phipp. Still, the bulk of the retort came into my head while I was actually in the boat, and I think you will agree, gentlemen, that it would have been a very pretty setting down, and one which he thoroughly deserved."

"Pity you didn't say it at the time," said Calthorp, with his hand to his mouth. "Well, you had an interview with Sir Roderick in this room."

"In this very room," acquiesced Mr. Phipp. "I remember it as if it had been yesterday. I found Sir Roderick entirely different to what I had pictured him. I had imagined him a gloomy recluse, a misanthrope, an anchorite. What was my surprise to find myself greeted with the utmost affability—I might almost say heartiness—by a tall, handsome gentleman with iron-grey hair, who looked just as if he might be going to step straight out of his front door and shoot a partridge." This illustration not quite pleasing Mr. Phipp, he added after a moment's consideration, "or a grouse."

"He looked, in fact, just like anybody else," suggested Calthorp.

"Quite so," said Mr. Phipp, "quite so. And I was immediately put entirely at my ease. He then proceeded to inform me of a rather extraordinary decision to which he **had** come, but in such a matter-of-fact way that it did not seem so unusual after all. He told me that he intended during the next fifteen—mark these words, gentlemen—during the next fifteen years, to turn the whole of his vast fortune—it must at that time have amounted to something like a million and a half of money—into precious stones. 'I will tell you the reason, Mr. Phipp, why I have intended to do this,' he said—I remember almost his exact words—'Living,' he said, 'in the way I have chosen to live, I cannot spend anything like the income which comes to me, and it has already grown too big for me to manage without giving more attention to it than I care about. During the last ten years I have spent a considerable portion of it in buying the various things, *objy dar* and so forth, which I should like you presently to see; but still my income has grown, and, to tell you the truth, the house will not hold much more. Now I think it would interest me to make such a collection of precious stones as has never been made before, at least in this country, and during the next fifteen years I shall gradually turn the whole of my personal

property into jewels. Speaking to a business man I may say that I shall exercise such judgment in making my purchases that after my death, if my collection comes to be broken up, as it probably will, it will be worth a good deal more than I have paid for it. Therefore, Mr. Phipp, you are not to regard me as a man who is about to throw away recklessly a million and a half of money ! ”

“ Of course I assured Sir Roderick that I should not do so, and further that he had a perfect right to dispose of his property as seemed best to him. He then went on to tell me why he had done me the honour of imparting his decision to me. He said that if it became known, through the bank clerks or anybody, that he was making away with such a large sum of money, no one knew how, it would set people talking about him again, which he did not want. He therefore wished to set my mind at rest on the subject, and he also asked me to keep what he had told me to myself, so that it should not get about that there was such an extremely valuable hoard of precious stones in the house.”

“ It all seems quite straightforward and above-board so far,” said Calthorp. “ What about the period of fifteen years which you mentioned, Mr. Phipp ? ”

“ You put the same question, sir,” replied Mr. Phipp, “ which was put to me by Mrs. Phipp when I retailed the circumstances to her. I keep nothing from my wife, gentlemen. I dislike secrets, but when I have once made her the repository of those that are confided to me, I find it easier to preserve them. The period of fifteen years mentioned by Sir Roderick had curiously enough remained in my brain, though I had not attached much importance to it when it was first mentioned to me, but when I mentioned it to Mrs. Phipp she immediately said, ‘ Why fifteen years ? ’ and I was really unable to inform her. But I will tell you this, gentlemen,”—Mr. Phipp leant forward in his chair, with his hands spread on his knees, and spoke impressively—“ *The fifteen years are nearly up, and Sir Roderick’s fortune has nearly disappeared.*”

“ How much is left ? ” asked Guy.

“ The exact balance in our hands,” replied Mr. Phipp, referring to his paper, “ is forty-one thousand, six hundred and fifty-six, nine, two.”

“ I may tell you,” said Calthorp, “ that Sir Roderick

when he died had nearly concluded negotiations to spend thirty-five thousand pounds on a jewel from India."

"Exactly so," said Mr. Phipp. "The sums remitted to us from time to time from the sale of investments were always paid in just before a big purchase was contemplated. The last was paid in on the eighteenth of December last and has been in our hands longer than usual. I presume that the negotiations hung fire, and perhaps it was fortunate that they did so, gentlemen."

"Very fortunate, I think," said Calthorp.

"And the extraordinary thing is," pursued Mr. Phipp, "as Mrs. Phipp remarked to me only last Sunday week, while we were discussing the matter over a cold supper, that at Sir Roderick's ordinary rate of expenditure, and supposing the payment in December to have been disposed of, at the end of the fifteen years—that is to say next February—he would have come down to the position of having no income at all."

"Have you—or Mrs. Phipp—formed any conjectures on the subject," asked Calthorp.

"A hundred, sir," replied Mr. Phipp. "But none of them fit. Perhaps a suggestion of Mrs. Phipp's comes nearest to the mark. It will be twenty-five years next March since Lady Bertram died. Mrs. Phipp has suggested that Sir Roderick may have had a presentiment that he should die at that time. But as I said to her, 'A presentiment, my dear, is all very well as far as it goes. I might have a presentiment that a certain horse would win the Derby and I might put a sovereign on it, but I should not risk the whole of my available income on that horse.'"

"What did Mrs. Phipp say to that?" asked Calthorp.

"She said, that I certainly should not, if she had a say in the matter," replied Mr. Phipp. "Her remark was in the nature of a pleasantry. She still keeps to her idea of a presentiment of death, and we occasionally have a playful and quite amiable argument on—Good Heavens!"

Mr. Phipp's chubby hand went up to his brow, and he sat staring in front of him with a look of utmost bewilderment on his face.

"What is it?" asked Calthorp and Guy together.

"Why, gentlemen, Mrs. Phipp is right," exclaimed that lady's husband. "The fifteen years are nearly up, and Sir Roderick is dead."

"No doubt of that, I'm afraid," said Calthorp, "but apparently his death came quite unexpectedly."

"That is so," said Mr. Phipp, gradually recovering from his surprise at the apparently remarkable fulfilment of Mrs. Phipp's prophecy. "Yes, that is so. He had not completed his last purchase, and he had left himself enough money to go on to the limit of time. No. His lamented death can hardly have come in the way the presentiment pointed out, if presentiment there was, which I have always doubted, and which we shall now never know. And the supposition I have formed during my drive here is not destroyed."

"What supposition?" enquired Calthorp.

"Foul play," returned Mr. Phipp, cheerfully, his bird-like eye resting first on one and then on the other.

"Go on," said Calthorp.

"I've never trusted Martin since the day he refused Mrs. Phipp's invitation," said Mr. Phipp. "I've no proof, no proof at all, and what I say must not go beyond the four walls of this room for fear of legal consequences, but what I say is that Martin has poisoned Sir Roderick, made away with his body for fear of an inquest, and walked off with the jewels."

"But Martin was away when Sir Roderick was taken ill," said Calthorp, "and didn't return until after Dr. Mellish came, and Dr. Mellish was with Sir Roderick when he died."

"Oh!" said Mr. Phipp, with a blank look of disappointment.

"So I don't think that Martin is quite so black as that"

"But he has taken the jewels," said Mr. Phipp, cheering up.

"It looks like it, certainly."

"Ah, he's a deep one," said Mr. Phipp, shaking a knowing head. "You can't say what he has done or what he hasn't done. I shouldn't be surprised if, after all, you were to find—but there, nobody shall say that Jasper Phipp is a backbiter. I leave it at that, gentlemen."

Mr. Phipp soon afterwards left altogether, having cleared up one or two puzzles, and suggested one or two more.

"What an extraordinary story it is," said Guy, when the little banker had disappeared. "What do you make of it, Dick?"

"Nothing much at present," returned Calthorp, "though I shall set to work on it by-and-bye. I am so constituted that I cannot do two things at once without inconveniencing myself, and just now I am anxious to see exactly how we stand. Mr. Phipp has assisted me there, and those books upstairs have been kept in such a wonderful way that in rather less than an hour I have got at pretty nearly everything it is necessary to know."

"You haven't found a will, have you?"

"No. And I don't think I shall. But that will perhaps make things easier for you. Now, I'll just tell you this. In those books there is a perfectly plain history of every transaction that has taken place with regard to Sir Roderick's property since he first shut himself up here. Every entry has been made by Martin. The rascal must have had a perfect genius for accounts. Every purchase has been entered—books, furniture, pictures, *objets d'art*, as our friend calls them, and precious stones. The last may come in useful. The estate seems to bring in very little. There are only two farms outside the park walls. One of these has apparently supplied the house, and the other has brought in enough to keep up the roads and walls. Expenses have amounted to six or seven thousand a year. A lot of money has been spent in the garden, but the stables have cost nothing much, and in other ways in which expenses mount up in a house kept up like this it has been saved. Sir Roderick lived entirely alone, and his personal expenditure has been practically nil."

"What about the money Martin took?" asked Guy.

"Phipp was quite right. He seems to have walked off with little short of a thousand a year in hard cash. But it is all down in the books, which you must remember were kept in Sir Roderick's dressing room and were always under his eye. Whatever he took before Sir Roderick's death must have been known."

"A thousand a year seems to be a fair lump for a valet."

"Yes. And his actual wages at two pounds a week are all down in black and white like everything else. Probably the other money was disbursed on Sir Roderick's behalf. That we don't know and apparently we are not intended to know, for everything else is as plain as the nose in front of your face. Now I'll tell you how you stand, Sir Guy Bertram. You've got the forty thousand odd that remains

in the bank at Keswick. You've got this house and all the treasures it contains, and they're worth almost anything you like to name. Sir Roderick has spent what to anyone else would be a large fortune on his purchases, and I know enough about these things to be able to say that he was scarcely capable of making a mistake. And when the jewels are found, you will have them, or their value."

"Yes, when they are found," said Guy.

"Mr. Martin is not destined to enjoy his liberty for very long," said Calthorp.

CHAPTER VIII

CONJECTURES

THE news of the disappearance of Sir Roderick's body flew like wild-fire over the country and created a mighty stir. The circumstances of his meteoric career in Parliament were recalled to mind and his speeches dragged to light out of "Hansard" and the *Times*. Very fine speeches some of these were, and the greatest of parliamentary causeurs was able to supply many an entertaining column of information as to how the young under-secretary looked and spoke when he first delivered them, his "copy" being illustrated with portraits of Sir Roderick by the greatest of parliamentary caricaturists, who had never seen him. The story of his romantic marriage with a penniless Italian beauty was dilated upon, and his retirement from the world after her death was treated from every point of view, but chiefly from the sentimental, which is the point of view the British public loves best.

The theory of theft for ransom, which had first occurred to and then been rejected by Calthorp, was the one seized on by all the papers, and many gruesome stories were dug out of commonplace books and disinterred from the files of old journals. No sooner had interest been aroused by the remarkable story of the "Alleged Theft of a Baronet's Body," than some fortunate weekly journal discovered and reproduced an old print of "The Terraces and Cascade at Merrilees, Cumberland, the seat of Sir Michael Bertram, Baronet," which, although it left as much to be supplied by the imagination as a black and white photograph of the glories of a sunset, aroused interest in the beauties of Sir Roderick's island paradise and doubled the number of reporters who clamoured at the high gates of the five lodges. Although the high wall round the park did not suffice to keep these intrusive gentlemen from trespassing, only one of them succeeded in setting foot on the island, in the guise of a policeman; and he was soon recognised for the jackdaw

he was by the peacocks whose feathers he had borrowed, and ignominiously ejected from the lodge gates, without having once pressed the button of his hand camera.

When the gossip about the beauties of Merrilees was at its height the story of the jewels leaked out, and then of their robbery; and altogether there was a constant succession of thrills and excitements, which kept the interest of the public alive in Merrilees and its late owner for a longer time than is usual with such nine days' wonders.

A considerable amount of this interest, it may be supposed, fell upon Guy, and he was surprised to find how well known his previous life had become to the world at large, and also what a lot of it there was to know.

An American paper, of which he received a copy later—for the Americans showed quite an intelligent interest in the affair—even went so far as to publish a long letter printed over a facsimile of the way the Editor would have signed Guy's name if it had happened to be his own, in which, after relating in a thrilling and picturesque manner his sensations on seeing the body of the uncle who had brought him up from childhood and died in his arms carried away before his eyes by four masked ruffians, who had previously taken the precaution of gagging him and tying him to the bedpost, he finished up with a high compliment to the well-known love of liberty of the free and glorious American people, in what connection it was not apparent. The letter was heralded by numerous headlines of a sensational and arresting nature, and accompanied by portraits of Mr. Gladstone and H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught, both taken in early youth, and labelled respectively "Sir Roderick C. Bertram and Sir Guy K. Bertram."

It may be said shortly that in spite of the most confident assurances of the gentlemen from Scotland Yard, in spite of miraculously elucidated clues discovered at the rate of two a day by the local police, no traces were found of Sir Roderick's body and nothing was heard or seen of the two fugitives, or of the enormous booty it was now admitted on all hands that they must have carried away with them. Calthorp, piecing together and rejecting evidence in a way which left the searching wits of the detectives struggling far behind him, had got no nearer the heart of the mystery than before, and Guy had unwillingly come to the conclusion, after living for a week in a turmoil of baseless surmise

and unfruitful exertion, that he would have to make up his mind for the present to arrange his life on the basis of his actual income, and not on that which he ought to have possessed had not Sir Roderick behaved like a fool in buying a million and a half pounds worth of jewels, and Martin like a knave in stealing them.

The calls of his business had summoned Calthorp back to London three days after their hurried journey northward, and, left to himself, Guy fell a victim to the utmost despondency. The beauties of his inherited home had no power to soothe or please him, living amongst them without a soul to talk to. The shadow of unexplained mystery hung over all like a blight, and two days after Calthorp's departure he found himself unable to support his state any longer, and formed the sudden resolution of shutting up the house until such time as the recovery of his fortune should enable him to revisit it in congenial company. The interval between a decision formed and a decision carried out was likely to be a short one with a man of Guy's impulsive temperament, and within a week of his arrival at Merrilees he had dismissed the greater part of its staff of servants and left it to the care of Mrs. Cheetham, with a maid or two to look after her and the treasures under her care, and taken himself back to his rooms in London.

So it came to pass that the month of June was not yet over when Guy and Calthorp found themselves walking up St. James's Street in the evening sunlight to dine together at White's Club, and discuss the weighty matters which had developed within so short a time. Guy had arrived in town only half an hour before, and had wired to Calthorp to meet him. Amidst the familiar surroundings of London, at that hour of the day when it is blossoming out from a city of work into a city of pleasure, the great house amongst the lonely northern hills seemed as remote as a half-forgotten dream.

The upstairs room of the club was full of diners, all talking at once, but at Guy's entrance there was a pause, and he realised for the first time that he was for the moment one of the most discussed men in London. Those in the room who knew him made haste to claim acquaintance, and those who did not regarded him with an air of interest and curiosity. Dining at one of the tables was

George Greenfield, as the guest of Mr. Robert Conder, M.P., a young gentleman whose legislative duties seemed to sit lightly on him, for there were few traces of care on his round and cheerful countenance.

"There's no table," said Guy; "let's go and sit with Bobby Conder and George. I don't mind talking before them."

"Well, Guy," said George, as they took their seats. "Your name is in all the papers, and your portrait stares at us from all the shop windows. If the populace at large knew you were sitting in this room there would be a crowd outside that would stop the traffic."

"There is a little too much notoriety about my position at the present juncture of affairs to suit my fastidious taste," said Guy.

"You're like a fellow in a novel," said Bobby Conder. "Sherry? No, thank you."

"I wish I were more like a fellow in real life," said Guy. "It is annoying to come into a pot of money and to find that somebody has walked off with it."

"My friend, Mr. Richard Calthorp, the eminent solicitor, who will some day bombard me with briefs, will get that back for you, or I overrate his abilities," said George.

"Had any luck yet, Dick?" asked Bobby Conder.

"Not yet," said Calthorp.

"Although the police are reticent," said George, "it is breaking no confidence to say that they are hot on the track of the culprits, and confidently expect to bring them to justice within a short period."

"Tell us about it," said Bobby Conder. "That is if you've got no objection."

"Not the least," said Guy. "The story is common property now. And I never saw Roderick Bertram in my life."

"There is a certain mystery of motive, isn't there?" asked George. "From what I've read it seems unlikely that they should be holding the body for ransom when they have got off with all that property. But the papers don't seem to spot the contradiction."

"With your customary perspicacity, you have put your finger on a point," said Calthorp, "a point upon which, I may mention, my own particular digit was firmly planted some time ago."

"In my own mind," said George, "I separate the disappearance of the body and the theft of the jewels. Of course, I have no data to go on beyond what are known to everybody."

"But how can you separate them?" asked Bobby Conder. "The body and the jewels disappeared at the same time, and Martin took 'em both."

"So it appears, most sapient one," said George; "but you will admit that it is at least curious that a gentleman who has set himself the task of getting away with a great treasure should choose to encumber himself with a dead body which, as far as one can see, cannot be of much use to him."

Bobby Conder admitted that this was certainly so, and that he had not hitherto regarded the matter in that light.

"If Guy has no objection, I might as well tell you what we know," said Calthorp. "Four heads are better than two, and as long as nothing we say here goes any further we shan't be doing any harm."

Guy having disclaimed any preference for an unduly close secrecy, and George and Bobby Conder having undertaken to keep to themselves whatever should be disclosed to them, Calthorp told them what Mrs. Cheetham had conjectured and the reasons she had given for her conjectures.

"The idea has more probability than any I have been able to evolve," said George when he had finished, "and I have thought about this business a good deal. What do you think of it yourself?"

"I think enough of it to have acted on it," replied Calthorp. "If it is as Mrs. Cheetham thinks, we should run Mr. Martin to earth at the place where Lady Bertram was buried, and before I left Merrilees Guy and I tried to find out where that place was. We had an unexpected difficulty. Neither the butler nor the housekeeper, who were both at Merrilees at the time, could call it to mind. All they remembered was that she had died in Italy. And there was no paper or anything in the house that gave us light. I got at it when I returned to town by looking up old files of newspapers. The place was said to be Assisi, and I wired this to Guy and got him to try it on the old people."

"Which I did with success," put in Guy. "They both

declared, now we came to mention it, that Martin had spoken of Assisi as the place of Lady Bertram's death and burial."

"So you sent out to Assisi?" said George.

"I did," replied Calthorp, "and this morning I received this curious piece of information. There is no trace of Lady Bertram's having been buried there at all."

"There must be a death certificate, if not a burial certificate," said George.

"There is neither. And here is another curious thing. The actual announcement in the *Times* stated only that Lady Bertram had died in Italy. Here it is: 'On March 14th, 18—, while travelling in Italy, Francesca, wife of Sir Roderick Bertram, Bart., and infant son.' It was only in the slightly padded statements in other parts of the paper that Assisi was mentioned."

"What do you make of it?" asked George.

"Nothing much; it was probably known that they had been at Assisi, and she may have been taken ill there, was moved on somewhere, perhaps on their way home, and she and the child died and were buried in some unknown place."

"It may be that this mystification was introduced deliberately five-and-twenty years ago," said George.

"Martin's plans seem to be deep ones."

"That may be so," replied Calthorp. "At any rate it would be useful to him now, supposing him to be conveying Sir Roderick's body to his wife's grave. By the time we have traced it he may have effected his purpose and got clear away again."

"It ought not to be very difficult to find out where Lady Bertram died," said Bobby Conder.

"I don't think it will," said Calthorp. "If they were at Assisi at all we ought to be able to trace them. They were of some importance, a man of Sir Roderick's reputation at the time travelling with his wife and a certain following. The man I have sent over there is doing all he can, and I expect to hear from him again in a day or two."

"It is just as well to follow up every clue," said George. "But after all, I think that this is an unlikely one. With the whole country roused against him, I should say Martin would find it absolutely impossible to get the body away from England."

"That's what I think," said Guy. "There are absolutely no traces of them up in Cumberland, and all the coast is being watched."

"I expect the body will be found buried somewhere near the house," said Bobby Conder.

"I should say," said Guy, "that by this time every foot of ground on the island and within the park walls has been examined, and the lake has been dragged from end to end. But it may be outside the park. There is a little gate in the wall to which Martin had a key."

"Well, we shall see," said Calthorp. "The reward has been doubled, and there must be hundreds of people on the search. If it has been buried anywhere near the place it will be found very soon."

"And what about the jewels?" asked George.

"I don't think you can avoid the conviction that Mr. Martin has walked off with them with a view of disposing of them for his own benefit," replied Calthorp. "He may have been as devoted to Sir Roderick as the housekeeper said he was, but there is no particular reason why he should have put himself out for Sir Roderick's successor, and I daresay he thought he could make as good a use of a large fortune as Guy. Let us be charitable and suppose that, having had such a large share in the business of getting them together, he had come to believe that they belonged to him as much as to anybody."

"He'll find they don't when we nab him," said Guy. "And I hope that will be pretty soon."

"Are you going to take up your abode at Merrilees, Guy?" asked Bobby Conder. "It must be a fine place from what one hears."

"My dear Bobby," said Guy, "you don't realise that that scoundrel has walked off with pretty nearly everything. Until he is run to earth and made to disgorge, I've got no money to keep up Merrilees or any other place. As a matter of fact, I'm very little better off than I was before."

"That's hard luck," said Bobby Conder. "Doesn't the place bring in anything?"

"Practically nothing."

"It contains a large fortune in treasures of art, and that sort of thing," said Calthorp. "If its contents were sold——"

"But I'm not going to sell them," interrupted Guy—"at

least, not until I'm obliged. I'm going to let the place. What do you think it ought to let for, Dick ? ”

“ I should think you might get about a thousand a year if the right man came along,” said Calthorp. “ It is out of the way, and there is nothing to shoot there. But the place is unique, and it is being well advertised for us.”

“ Well, I shan't be so badly off in the meantime if I get that for it,” said Guy, who was by nature inclined to take cheerful views. “ I shall build a cottage in the country. I've always wanted to do that, and I don't know that I shan't enjoy it more than living in that enormous great place. So if any of you have got a tame millionaire up his sleeve who wants a fine country house, and doesn't mind what he pays for it, just put him on to me.”

“ I believe my uncle Caradoc might take it if it's everything the papers say it is,” said Bobby Conder. “ I know he's on the look-out for a place away from his beastly coal-mines.”

“ What, Lord Caradoc, the historian ? ” exclaimed George. “ Book him, Guy. Your name will go down to posterity if he writes his book in your house.”

“ It might be worth while to send Lord Caradoc particulars of the place,” said Calthorp.

“ He wouldn't open your letter,” said Bobby Conder, “ and if he did he wouldn't answer it. He lives in the Middle Ages, and don't understand the workings of the penny post. If you were to engage a befeater, and send him round with particulars on a roll of parchment, you might stand some chance of arousing his attention.”

“ That seems probable,” said Calthorp. “ But such a course does not come within my conceptions of the fitting way to approach a possible client. I might call on him.”

“ People don't generally call upon him when he's in London,” said Bobby Conder ; “ at least, they don't call twice. I can do a bit in the conversational line myself with most people, but when you are shown into a room and find an old gentleman snowed up under books and papers, and he says, ‘ How do you do ? ’ with a ‘ Say-what-you've-got-to-say-and-clear-out ’ sort of air, it don't make you feel in your very chattiest mood.”

“ How is he to be got at, then ? ” inquired Calthorp. “ Would you suggest a bomb outside his front door ? ”

“ I'll tell you what,” said Bobby Conder. “ Mind you,

I really believe he might take the place if you could bring home to him that it is what he wants, or else it wouldn't be worth while trying to break through to what brain he's got for nineteenth century affairs. He comes out of his shell once a year, and sits through the Oxford and Cambridge cricket match from beginning to end. Why he does it I don't know. I don't suppose he could tell the difference between a cricket bat and a—a tilting spear. But he has done it ever since they played cricket in top hats, and he'll be at Lord's next week. I shall be there on Thursday, at any rate, and he'll be lunching at our table. If you and Dick will come too, I'll introduce you to him, and you can land him with the house and clear out."

"It might be worth trying," said Guy. "Can you come, Dick?"

"I'm very busy," said Calthorp, "but I'll make an effort," and he booked the engagement in his note-book.

When dinner was over, and the party had sat for half an hour in the room downstairs, Guy suggested an adjournment to some place of entertainment.

"Let us revel," he said. "I want to get the taste of this beastly mystery out of my mouth."

Bobby Conder showed no disinclination to indulge for an hour or two in lighter pursuits than those of walking in and out of division lobbies and listening to debates, or smoking cigarettes in an underground cellar. But George dissuaded him.

"No, no," he said. "Bobby isn't paired. He mustn't be allowed to incur the displeasure of the Whips. Why, his absence might upset the Government. Bobby is going down to the House like a good little member of Parliament, and I am going with him to listen to the bulwark of our nation's liberties—if you can properly be said to listen to a bulwark."

"Let's just drop into the Alhambra for half an hour," urged Bobby Conder. "There's that new Spanish dancer. She's rippin'. There's nothing going on in the House, and there are plenty of them without me."

"No, my budding Premier," said George. "You will come along with me and help make your country's laws, which we have all got to obey when you have made them."

"What an insistent fellow you are!" said Bobby Con-

der, ruefully. "I did want to see that dancer. But have it your own way."

Guy went out with them while they put on their coats.

"How is Mrs. Greenfield?" he asked George.

"Very well, thanks," replied George. "She'll be interested to hear I've met you now you've become such a public character."

"And Miss Richards?"

"Peggy is at present finishing her education in Paris. She, also, will be interested in news of you."

"You might remember me to her when you write," said Guy diffidently.

"I will," said George. "Now then, young Palmerston, are we going to walk or take a cab?"

CHAPTER IX

LORD CARADOC AND A CRICKET MATCH

CARADOC, 16th Baron (*cr.* 1417), Rev. Owen Joseph Caradoc, D.C.L. (Oxon.), LL.D. (Cambridge and Dublin), F.R.S., *b.* 18—, 2nd s. of 14th Baron and Letitia, *d.* of Sir Raymond Mandrake, 8th Bt.,; *S. b.* 18—; *m.* Louisa, *d.* of 1st Lord Conder (she died 18—). *Educ.*: Privately, and at Univ. Coll., Oxford. B.A. 18—; 1st class Lit. Hum.; M.A. 18—; Fellow of All Souls'; Hon. Fellow of Univ. Coll. and St. John's Coll., Cambridge; Foreign Knight of the Order *Pour le Mérite*, 18—; corresponding member of Institute of France; rector of Treglith, Glamorgan, 18—. *Publications*: The Rise of the English Universities; Roger Ascham; The Authorship of Eikon Basilike; The University of Bologna; History of Socinianism; England's Relations with the Continent in the Middle Ages, vols. i. to vii. Owns about 48,700 acres. *Heir*: *d.* Hon. Cicely Mary Caradoc, *b.* 18—. *Recreations*: Acquisition of foreign languages; botany. *Address*: Caradoc Castle, Carnarvon; 153, Berkeley Square, S.W. *Club*: Athenæum.

THERE, in a nutshell, extracted from the pages of a useful work of reference, are set forth the titles, honours, history, wealth, and position of an old gentleman who, accompanied by a young girl—the Hon. Cicely Mary Caradoc, in fact, of the above extract—took his seat in a shady stand at Lord's Cricket Ground on a fine morning early in July, prepared to watch the rival Universities do battle for something like the fortieth time. Other old gentlemen in the Pavilion and in other seats in the various stands were preparing themselves for a similar experience, but it is doubtful whether any of them had done the thing so systematically as this particular one for so many years past. Bobby Conder's disrespectful statement that his uncle knew nothing whatever about the game of cricket must be considered an exaggeration, although it was perfectly true that the Oxford and Cambridge match was the only one at which Lord Caradoc ever put in an appearance as a

spectator. Judging from the way in which he watched every ball and every stroke from behind a pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses, perched on a high-bridged aristocratic nose, and from the precise manner in which he recorded the progress of the game on his "correct card of the match" with an aristocratic gold pencil-case, and the reminiscences of other matches with which he favoured his companion, whose attention often wandered from the game itself to the spectators around her, he took a very considerable interest in it indeed, and understood its points perhaps as well as Mr. Bobby Conder himself. In fact, in the early days of his residence at the University of Oxford, a good many years previously, although not perhaps at the time when cricket was commonly played in tall hats, Mr. Owen Caradoc, as he was then, had been noted for his delivery of very fast underhand balls of a disconcerting gyratory tendency, and if other pursuits had not claimed his attention in place of that of the national game, it is quite possible that he might himself have taken part in the great match which he had watched with such close attention every year since that time.

As, for reasons of our own, we have suppressed the exact dates which are set forth with such accuracy in the work of reference from which we have quoted, it may be said that Lord Caradoc had spent the greater part of his life engaged in the pursuit of knowledge in the retirement of a country rectory, where he had the spiritual oversight, according to Crockford, of 247 souls, and a net income from his benefice of the inconsiderable sum of £17 per annum, with what Mr. Crockford, in his pleasant way, is accustomed to call a "ho.," which means a house, and twenty-six acres of glebe. Here his daughter had been born and his wife had died, though he would have found some difficulty in fixing the date of those events, and, if you had asked him the question suddenly, might even have hesitated as to which had occurred first. His elder brother having died unmarried, the rector of Treglith had found himself at the age of fifty-seven saddled with a large landed estate and an enormous house, somewhat marred from the point of view of peaceful retirement by the proximity of several coal-mines, from which a surprising number of thousands of pounds found their way annually into his pocket. A seat in the House of Lords which he had no

desire to occupy and a voice in the conclaves of the nation which he was very far from wishing to exercise were also contingent on his newly acquired responsibilities.

These several demands upon his lordship's time and attention caused him acute annoyance. He had felt little regret at relinquishing his cure of souls, for he had never been without an uneasy feeling that it was incumbent upon him in the exercise of his clerical functions to express some interest in the lives of his parishioners ; but as he had never been able to remember the names of any of them, or who they were, or anything about them, this had not been possible, and it was a relief to be rid of the suspicion that something might be reasonably expected of him that he was not able to carry out. The house, however, to which, although small, he had grown accustomed, and the twenty-six acres of glebe, most of which he had converted by degrees into a botanical garden of some degree of fame amongst horticulturists, he was very loath to give up. Caradoc Castle, a very old house very much modernised, with its formal gardens, greenhouses, orchid houses, forcing houses, vineries, pinetums, and what not, all kept up at vast expense in order that the head gardener might win prizes at horticultural shows all over the kingdom, thrilled him with disgust, and he had never been able to bring himself to inhabit it. The money that accrued to him in invasions of figures on the credit side of his bank-book he had not the slightest use for, and having been driven out of his peaceful rectory, he had cut the knot of his difficulties by removing himself, his books and papers and his young daughter, to the house in Berkeley Square, where he greatly missed his garden, but had not, during the five years in which he had enjoyed his new honours, been able to make up his mind to acquire another house in the country which would suit him better than Caradoc Castle.

This was the old gentleman who sat amongst the crowd at Lord's on a fine July morning watching the progress of the Oxford and Cambridge cricket match.

He was a tall and spare old gentleman, somewhat withered by the course of years, like an autumn stalk of uncut grass that has lost its natural juices, but otherwise vigorous and active. At a time when men of all ages wear the same sort of clothes, so that you may see a boy fresh from the sixth form and his grandfather dressed by the

same tailor, haberdasher, hatter, and bootmaker, and in much the same style, Lord Caradoc had managed to preserve an old-fashioned primness about his attire. His hat had a broad brim. His shirt was of fine unstarched linen, with wristbands very little stiffened and a front pleated in such a way as almost to suggest a frill. His coat was hardly a frock coat and hardly what is called a morning coat, but partook of the nature of both. It was very neat and very unobtrusive, and fitted his tall spare figure very well. His trousers were of a dark pepper-and-salt pattern, narrow, and coming well down over his square-toed boots. His tie of white cambric was the only thing about his dress that suggested his profession. He wore round his neck a thin gold chain, and on his nose the gold-rimmed glasses before referred to, and he looked a very aristocratic, learned, precise gentleman of the old school.

The young girl who sat beside him bore in some undefinable way a resemblance to her father. She was tall, and, young as she was, and not yet taken out and introduced to the world, she had the same air of breeding. But there the resemblance ended. The shy dove's eyes, the soft cheek on which the colour came and went so readily, the rounded slimness of her young form in its summer attire of dainty simplicity, made as great a contrast as it would be possible to find to the prim dried-up old gentleman by her side.

The pair had sat there since the first ball had been bowled, Lord Caradoc intently watching the progress of the game, and Cicely, after the first few overs and a fallen wicket had somewhat taken the edge off her interest, watching no less intently the benches, now gradually filling around her. Life was a book of which as yet she had scarcely read more than the preface, and that had not interested her greatly. But she had just begun to realise that the book itself might be worth reading, although she had hardly begun to speculate on the contents, and these people around her were, perhaps, some of them, in the most exciting chapters. Hence her interest in them and in all humankind such as had not, like her father, reached the duller pages towards the end.

When the luncheon interval arrived they walked together on the grass, which was soon covered with a crowd that looked as if it could not possibly have contained itself in the restricted limits to which it had been confined while

the great expanse of green was given up to the perambulations of thirteen young men and two middle-aged ones. All the people who had overflowed the great green lawn seemed to be either talking or laughing to each other or meeting friends with whom they talked or laughed, breaking up into fresh groups and continually stopping again and re-sorting themselves; and Cicely was inclined to think that the Oxford and Cambridge match might be rather more amusing than it was if there were a little less cricket and a little more walking and talking, and more especially so if she had a great many friends whom she should constantly be meeting, instead of the one single and rather dusty old clergyman who was just now engaging her father in conversation and was the first person so far who had done more than greet them with a sign of recognition.

The dusty old clergyman proved to be a college contemporary of her father's who actually had played in the match against Cambridge at a time when Mr. Owen Caradoc had left off bowling those puzzling underhand balls, and was taking his first plunge into the researches from which he had emerged only on very rare occasions ever since. Their talk was of cricket of the past, and Cicely looked about her again to see if there was nobody at all whom she knew amongst all that gay crowd. Ah! This was better. Here were her cousins, the Condors, a large party of them, with whom she and her father were to lunch, and with them a very good-looking young man, whose face seemed unaccountably familiar to her, and another tall, grave and amazingly well-groomed young man whose face was not familiar. There was a large number of Condors, all round-faced and freckled, looking very clean and healthy, as if they had spent a considerable portion of their time being washed and then hung out to dry in the sun.

There was her uncle, Lord Conder, very cheerful and bucolic, with his freckles drowned in a wash of vermilion, who said, "Howdy do? Howdy do?" very heartily to all his acquaintances. There was Bobby Conder, the member of Parliament, whose freckles had been to some extent eradicated for the time being by late hours and the insipid air of division lobbies. There was Algy Conder, the Lifeguardsman, whose freckles had got crowded up into a sort of triangle of white skin in a corner of his forehead, while the rest of his face had been burnt into a more fiery

red than that of his father's by the hot suns of Salisbury Plain. There was Freddy Conder, the sailor, whose freckles had been spread all over his face by the sun and wind of the Pacific Ocean, and Dicky Conder, home on leave from Eton, whose freckles had overflowed his face and got into his hair, leaving it very bright and conspicuous. And there were Mary and Maggie and Florrie and Katie and Elsie and Daisy Conder, a smiling collection of girls, ranging from two-and-twenty down to thirteen, whose freckles confined themselves chiefly to the bridges of their little noses, and in the case of the two elder ones, by dint of the careful use of veils and parasols, had almost been got rid of for the period of the London season, but not quite. All this brisk and smiling bevy of round-faced Conders, whose natures seemed to have been touched by the sun as well as their faces, swarmed round Cicely and plied her with cousinly greetings. Elsie and Daisy, who were twins, took hold of an arm each and constituted themselves a bodyguard. Cicely looked like a blush rose between two nasturtiums. The dusty old clergyman, somewhat alarmed by this invasion, took himself off, and Lord Caradoc, shaking hands with a great many young people whom he dimly remembered having seen somewhere before, seemed to wake up to the fact that his brother-in-law had a family of a considerable size.

"Time for lunch, children!" said cheerful little Lord Conder. "We ought to be able to pick up a bit now. Eh, what?"

They made their way to the shady garden behind the Pavilion, where a table was spread under a tent, and where Lady Conder, a placid little lady, round-faced, too, but not after the freckled Conder fashion, was awaiting them with two or three other members of their party. On their way to the tent Elsie and Daisy were detached, after some little remonstrance on their part, from their cousin's side, and Guy Bertram was introduced to her by Mary, in whose demeanour might have been detected a considerable pride in Cicely's beauty, and a feeling of relief that, amongst such a plethora of freckled Conders, here was a companion that a young man accustomed to sun himself in the beams of feminine beauty could not but feel himself more naturally allied to. But Guy took the introduction quite coolly. Cicely was very pretty, but she was very young, and very shy, and he soon dropped back to laugh and joke with Maggie and Florrie, while his place was taken by Freddy Conder, who

had not seen his cousin for three years, and was anxious to rally her in a breezy sea-going way on the immense improvement that had taken place during that time in her general appearance.

Cicely responded as well as she could to her cousin's chaff without paying much attention to it. Sir Guy Bertram! Of course, she had recognised him—the young man whose portrait had been in all the illustrated papers, who was the hero of such a romantic story, and the owner of a lovely place, which by a strange turn in the wheel of fortune he was unable to inhabit. His loss did not seem to occasion him much regret, judging from the light-hearted way in which he was laughing and talking behind her. It would be different when the wickets were drawn in the evening, and the ground shut up, and all the gay throng had dispersed to their respective places of abode. Then he would throw off the gallant face with which he met the buffets of fortune before the world, and brood over the maddening obstacle which he was powerless to remove. Guy's story, as told in the papers she had read, had taken hold of Cicely's imagination. She felt very sorry for him, and admired not a little the brave way in which he was evidently facing his disappointment.

Lord Caradoc, seated on Lady Conder's right at the head of the long table crowded with cold viands, flowers and fruit, and cooling drinks, seemed to wake up to the conviction that a meal eaten in company was a not unpleasant experience, if not repeated too often—say about six times a year—and chatted quietly, but cheerfully, with his hostess. And surely the table at which he was sitting was the gayest and brightest amongst the many that were spread under the tents which surrounded Lord's Cricket Ground. There was a continuous babble of talk and merry laughter from the whole tribe of freckled Conders and their friends, and everyone appeared in the highest good humour. A constant succession of guests appeared at intervals and dropped into the empty places at the table, always with a delighted word of welcome from Lord Conder, and everyone seemed to fall instantly into the humour of their hosts, and began to talk and laugh and make jokes the moment they had taken their seats, as if the world was the most cheerful and interesting place imaginable, and there was never a moment in which to feel dull or languid of mind.

Lord Caradoc and a Cricket Match 101

After luncheon, when the men were left to themselves for a few minutes, Bobby Conder took Guy and Calthorp up to the end of the table where Lord Caradoc was sitting, and introduced them.

Lord Caradoc, under the unwonted stimulus he was undergoing, was perhaps in a more fitting frame of mind to discuss a matter having definite bearings on life in the nineteenth century than would be the case until the Oxford and Cambridge match should come round again in the course of the following summer. To Bobby Conder's inquiry as to whether he wasn't thinking of taking a country house somewhere with a beautiful garden he replied genially :

"My dear Robert, take me away from Berkeley Square, and put me down anywhere in the country a hundred miles away from Caradoc Castle and two hundred from a coal-mine, and you will confer a favour on me which I shall endeavour not to forget."

"You have heard of Merrilees, Bertram's place in Cumberland ?" hazarded Bobby.

Lord Caradoc couldn't say that he had. "Was there any coal anywhere near it ?"

"A few tons in the cellars. That's all," said Guy, speaking rather loudly, as if Lord Caradoc was slightly deaf, which he undoubtedly was where ordinary conversation was concerned.

"It is that lovely place on an island in the middle of a lake with Italian terraces," said Bobby. "You know, Uncle Owen, where Sir Roderick Bertram shut himself up for so many years."

"Roderick Bertram !" said Lord Caradoc. "Oh, I know all about Roderick Bertram. He wants to let the place, does he ?"

"He's dead, you know, Uncle Owen," said Bobby Conder. "Bertram here is his cousin. Merrilees belongs to him now, and he wants to let it, and to you, if you'll take it."

"It sounds very nice," said Lord Caradoc. "Is there a bit of garden where I could put in a few plants and see them come up ? That's what I want, you know. Don't care a bit about great beds of geraniums, and that sort of thing."

"It is one of the most beautiful gardens in England," said Guy, "and there is hardly a formal bed in it. I can send you along some photographs, if you like."

"Sounds very nice," said Lord Caradoc again. "Not overlooked at all, I suppose?"

"It stands alone on an island in the middle of a lake, Uncle Owen," said Bobby Conder.

"And there's a park round the lake, and a high wall round the park," added Guy.

"Come, that's better," said Lord Caradoc. "Sounds as if you might keep pretty quiet if you wished to, and do a little writing and so forth. Is there a room in the house where I could put a few books and papers?"

"There's a very fine library," said Guy.

"Any good books?" inquired Lord Caradoc.

"Yes," said Guy. "The whole collection must be a good one. I believe my cousin, Sir Roderick Bertram, added to it very largely."

Lord Caradoc turned round sharply in his chair.

"Sir Roderick Bertram!" he exclaimed, "the man who bought the Ffoulkes Library! God bless my soul! *His* house, is it? Why didn't you say so before? Oh, I'll take the house by all means. If you will kindly instruct your men of business to communicate with my men of business, Messrs.—Messrs.—the name escapes me for the moment, but if Robert will come round with me to Berkeley Square this evening, I can tell him. Oh, the Ffoulkes Library! I'm very much indebted to you for giving me the opportunity of taking the place."

"I shall be very pleased to have such a tenant, Lord Caradoc," said Guy. "I will give you any other information about the place that you may like to hear. Mr. Calthorp will act for me as far as business arrangements are concerned."

Guy indicated Calthorp, with whom Lord Caradoc courteously shook hands, oblivious of his previous introduction.

"How do you do, sir?" said Lord Caradoc. "My solicitors, Messrs. Walters and Venable, of Lombard Street, are good enough to take the burden of financial management off my shoulders. If you will kindly communicate with them, they will no doubt signify me when the necessary preliminaries are completed. That is all, I suppose, that we can do in the matter at present. And, Robert, you will come round to Berkeley Square, will you, before dinner, to——"

"To get the names of Messrs. Walters and Venable, of

Lombard Street, Uncle Owen ? ” inquired Bobby Conder, with a broad grin on his face.

“ Ah, that’s it ; that’s the name,” acquiesced Lord Caradoc. “ But, bless my soul, boy,” he added in great amazement, “ how did you know that ? ”

“ The name is a household word,” put in Calthorp. “ I will communicate with them at once.”

“ There is one thing, perhaps, that I ought to mention,” said Guy. “ My cousin, Roderick Bertram, died at Merrilees a short time ago, under somewhat mysterious circumstances, and——”

“ Dear me, I am very sorry to hear that,” said Lord Caradoc. “ He had been ill some months, had he not ? I do not recollect meeting with him lately.”

“ Nobody has seen him for five-and-twenty years,” said Guy, somewhat at a loss to know how to bring home what everybody was talking about to one who showed himself so sublimely unconscious of popular interests. “ He died suddenly, but the circumstances of his death were not so mysterious as the sudden disappearance of his body the day after.”

“ Dear me ! ” commented Lord Caradoc.

“ It might be necessary,” said Calthorp, “ to insert a clause in our agreement to the effect that we reserve to ourselves the right of entrance to the house at any time, in order to clear up the mystery.”

“ I should have no objection to that,” said Lord Caradoc, “ provided I could keep my few books and papers undisturbed, and that as little noise might be made as possible. But details of that sort had better be discussed with my men of business.”

“ We shall give you as little trouble as possible,” said Calthorp.

Cicely did not return to her seat by her father after luncheon. She was happier on the box seat of her uncle’s drag, which was drawn up in a position favourable for watching both the progress of the game and the stream of people which flowed outside the line of carriages and the huge encircling stands, people who made sudden efforts to catch a fleeting glimpse of the players when an outburst of cheering indicated that something worth seeing had been done at the wickets or in the field, and then contentedly resumed their perambulations. Here, somewhat to her

surprise—she was not quite sure whether she was pleased or not—Guy Bertram climbed from the back of the coach and sat down beside her, dispossessing a Conder twin for the second time, much to that twin's disappointment.

"Your father is going to be my tenant in my house in Cumberland, Miss Caradoc," said Guy. "We haven't taken long to settle it up, have we?"

Cicely looked at him in surprise, a blush rising to her forehead and spreading over her cheeks.

"My father?" she said. "Merrilees?"

"Ah, you have read about the place, I suppose; everybody has been talking about it lately. Yes, Bobby thought he might like it, you know. It is a lovely place with a lovely garden, and it seems there is a library of books which Lord Caradoc wants to have the use of. So our respective lawyers are going to settle it all up for us."

"I shall be glad to live in the country again," said Cicely; "London is rather dull for me, except to-day: I like this."

"You will like Merrilees, I expect," said Guy. "It really is a lovely place. I wish I could afford to live there myself, but I can't, so it's no good grumbling about it."

"Do you want to live there very much?" asked Cicely, shyly.

"Rather!" replied Guy, quite cheerfully. "If you come across a million and a half pounds' worth of jewels lying about the house anywhere you'll let me know, won't you?"

"Oh, I wish I could find them for you," said Cicely, seriously.

"Ah, I'm afraid that isn't so easy. Mr. Martin, of whom you have probably read, has made a clean sweep of them, and here am I in consequence an unfortunate beggar with very little to bless himself with. Everybody knows all about me through the kind offices of the daily press, so, you see, I've nothing to conceal. Oh, excuse me, I must go and talk to those people."

Guy clambered somewhat hurriedly off the coach, and Cicely watched him go to up a tall handsome man who was passing in company with a girl, dark and very pretty, and well dressed in a simple costume that bore the stamp of Paris. She saw him stop the man, who greeted him with warmth, and shake hands with the girl, who turned a laughing, roguish face on him, and then the three were lost in the crowd of people walking round and round the ground.

CHAPTER X

GUY BERTRAM RECEIVES AN INVITATION

"WHY, I thought you were pursuing your studies in Paris, Miss Peggy," said Guy as they moved on.

"Do you know what this young monkey has done?" asked George. "She has run away from school."

"Not run away, exactly, George," said Peggy. "I came home."

"She came home," said George. "She threw obedience to the authorities provided for her to the winds, and came home."

"I had enough of it," explained Peggy. "Dresden was all very well, and Paris wasn't so bad at first, but I got homesick, and I didn't like Madame Guérin, so I told her I was coming home, and I came."

"That's all," said George. "Quite simple. She told Madame Guérin she was coming home, and she came. She has omitted to state that she is going back on Monday."

"Never," said Peggy, very firmly. "*J'y suis. J'y reste.*"

"Keep it slow, and give the vowels their full value, and I shall be able to follow you," said Guy. "Well, I applaud your resolution. London isn't half a bad place just now."

"It's perfectly heavenly," said Peggy, enthusiastically. "I wouldn't go back to Paris after this for anything."

"We shall see when Monday morning comes," said George. "Papa has been communicated with, but he lives in Glasgow, and until we hear from him we are making the most of our opportunities."

At the end of a pleasant hour, spent in the company of George and Peggy, Guy ventured to assert, somewhat diffidently, that he had been intending for some time to call on Mrs. Greenfield in Highgate.

"She'll be very pleased to see you," said George. "We have never forgotten the day in Cambridge when you were so kind in looking after us, have we, Peg? Come up

with me on Sunday morning to lunch, or, rather, early dinner. We'll all go for a walk afterwards if it's fine."

Peggy did not second the invitation verbally, but a questioning glance into her black eyes served to encourage Guy to accept it.

"Very well, then," he said. "Good-bye till Sunday."

At the end of the day's play George took Peggy home to Highgate. She was delighted with her experiences and chattered gaily, but as their cab slowly climbed the steep hill on the summit of which the cottage stood she became silent.

"You know, George," she said presently, "I don't think mother looks a bit well. She seems to be worried about something."

"That is easily understood," said George, drily.

Peggy looked a little graver. "George, dear," she said, "I don't think it is because of me coming home, really. If father is angry about it, he couldn't possibly blame her."

George made no reply to this, but the look on his face might have been taken to mean that Mr. Richards had better not blame his mother for anything while he was by.

"She didn't make a fuss about my coming home," continued Peggy. "In fact, she seemed glad to have me. Of course, it is lonely for her, poor dear, living so much by herself. She said she must write to father and ask what was to be done about me, but when she had done that she said nothing more about it. I am sure there is something else that is worrying her."

"What is it?" asked George, shortly.

"I don't know. But couldn't you stay at home for a few days? She is always happy when you are there. I am sure it would cheer her up. Besides, I want you to so much."

"I will stay to-night," said George, after a pause. "I must be in town to-morrow and Saturday night, but I shall be up again on Sunday."

"It was nice meeting Mr. Bertram again—Sir Guy Bertram, I mean—wasn't it?" said Peggy, in a tone of elaborate unconcernedness. "I expect mother will be glad to see him on Sunday."

"Yes, he is a good chap," said George, absently. He

was thinking of Mr. Richards, and his face was not very amiable at that moment.

George looked carefully at his mother when he had paid the cabman, and followed Peggy into the cottage, where she was waiting for him. She was very pleased to see him and to hear that he was going to stay until the next morning. But she looked undoubtedly worried and anxious.

"What is it, mother, darling?" asked George, drawing her into the parlour, when Peggy had gone upstairs. "Have you heard from Richards yet about that naughty girl?"

"Not yet. There has hardly been time, unless he had telegraphed. I am so glad to have you here for a little time, my dearest boy."

George kissed her. "I am coming up again on Sunday," he said. "I daresay I might stay for a day or two, or at any rate come up in the evenings. And I am going to bring a friend of yours to see you on Sunday, mother."

"A friend?" echoed Mrs. Greenfield. "What friend, George?"

"Do you remember a young man who was very kind to you and Peggy at Cambridge two years ago?"

He was astonished at the change in his mother's face. She grew pale and almost gasped.

"Not Sir Guy Bertram!" she exclaimed. "No, no, George, you mustn't bring him here."

"Mother dear, why on earth not?" said George in utter amazement.

"I had no idea when we were at Cambridge that he was—that he was the Sir Guy Bertram that all the papers have been talking about."

"Well, he wasn't then. But, dear mother, what possible objection can you have to his coming here? He is an old friend of mine, and all this that has happened lately makes no difference in him. Why mustn't I bring him here?"

Mrs. Greenfield sat down in a chair by the table. She seemed to be collecting her thoughts.

"You know, George," she said quietly, "I stand in the place of a mother to Peggy. She is very young yet, and—and——"

"And what, mother?" asked George, his face becoming rather hard.

"Have you seen Sir Guy Bertram to-day?" she asked, ignoring his question. "Has Peggy seen him?"

"Yes, he was at Lord's. He said he had been meaning to call on you. So I asked him to come up with me on Sunday."

"You see, dear George, it is over a year since we met Sir Guy Bertram, but it is only to-day that he suggests coming to call on me."

"What of that, mother?"

"Peggy is very pretty and very taking. But we are not—her father is not—in the same position as Sir Guy Bertram. I know—I know he would object to it very much if—if anyone like that were to pay her attentions."

George laughed.

"Oh, really, mother," he said, "I think this is a little premature. Such a thing never entered my head. Bertram is a year older than I am, and has seen a great deal of the world; Peggy is a mere schoolgirl."

A ghost of a smile passed over Mrs. Greenfield's pale face.

"She is over nineteen," she said, "and very pretty. Sir Guy Bertram *was* attracted by her two years ago, and his wanting to come here now, amongst people so unlike those he mixes with, shows that there is still some attraction. A woman sees those things, George dear, and I am not mistaken."

George was silent for a moment.

"You may be right," he said. "I don't deny that he is attracted by her. It is obvious enough. Anybody would be. But it is quite open and above board, and for a man like that to talk and laugh with a lively child like Peggy is not the same thing as falling in love with her."

"It might lead to that."

"I don't think so. My dear mother, if you heard the way in which he talks to her? I really believe it is the last thing that would enter into his head."

"Perhaps so. But, George dear, what about Peggy? Do you think it is fair on her to let a gentleman like Sir Guy Bertram come here and be on intimate terms with her, if falling in love with her, as you say, is the last thing that would enter his head?"

"I don't believe she has any more idea of such a thing

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than he has," replied George, somewhat impatiently. "She is much too young."

"Oh, George, George!" said his mother. "What do you know about the ways of a girl's heart? No. She has no idea of such a thing at present, not consciously at any rate. And I want to prevent the idea coming to her before it is too late."

"I see what you mean," said George, rather unwillingly. "One is apt to forget, perhaps, that one's place in the world has to be made and has not come by birth, and that such differences are thought a great deal of by many people. I am bound to say that such possibilities as have occurred to you would not have occurred to me, but I would not encourage Bertram to come here if there are such possibilities. And yet I don't know. One must be honest about these things. After all, mother, supposing Bertram did fall in love with Peggy, and she with him, it would be a very happy marriage for her. It seems rather absurd to look so far ahead, for Peggy is little more than a child. But, I say, if it were to come about in the future I don't know anybody to whom I would rather give my little sister."

"If she were really your sister. But her father would never allow it, never."

"Why not?" asked George, now veering round, and inclined to support an idea to which Mr. Richards might be likely to take exception. "There is nothing against Bertram. He is an idle man, perhaps, but he has never been brought up to work, and his idleness at any rate is not mischievous. He is well off, even if this extraordinary stolen property never comes to him; and as for his position, after all, it isn't usually considered a drawback to a man when he marries. Why should Richards object?"

"George dear, to please me, can't you put Sir Guy Bertram off?" pleaded Mrs. Greenfield. "I am so fearful of trouble coming of it, and I do really believe that if he were to come here, and Mr. Richards were to hear of it, as he would, he would take Peggy away. I don't want to lose her."

George's face was dark.

"The man seems to have the power of dictating to us whatever we do," he said. "I suppose I must write to Guy

and say that—I don't know what I can say. I hate doing that sort of thing."

"You may say that I am not well enough to see him. It is quite true."

"What is it, little mother?" asked George, putting his arm round her. "What are you worrying yourself about?"

Mrs. Greenfield's eyes filled with tears.

"You are very good to your old mother," she said. "I think I can be happy with my two children. I didn't say so to Peggy, but my heart just leapt for pleasure when I saw her sweet, naughty face coming in at the door. I have begged her father to let her stay with me now."

George's heart smote him. "I will come and live up here, mother, if he sends her back," he said.

"No, George," said Mrs. Greenfield, firmly. "I have made up my mind to that degree of separation, and I see you oftener than when you were at Cambridge, though not for such a long time together. You have got your work to do, and you must do it in the best way you can. If only I am allowed to keep Peggy, and can see you as often as I have done, I shall be content."

"At any rate I will come up on Saturday afternoon," said George. "I can easily put off my dinner engagement. We will be together for that little time, at any rate, whether Miss Peggy is packed off to school again or not. I will write to Bertram to-morrow."

Friday and Saturday passed without any word coming from Mr. Richards. Peggy, in spite of the bold face she put upon her elopement from the rigours of Madame Guérin's establishment, was obviously a little nervous.

"I am not going back again, whatever he says," she said to George, who was sitting in the little garden with her on Saturday afternoon. "Mother wants me here; I know she does. But I shall feel so much more comfortable when it is all settled."

By the late post on Saturday evening George received a note from Guy Bertram, written that morning from a country house near St. Albans.

"I came down here suddenly yesterday," he wrote, "but am leaving on Sunday morning, and shall come straight to Highgate, as I see I can get there without going into town."

"Then the matter is out of our hands," said George.

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"It is too late to write, and too late to wire. And you are better now, mother, aren't you?" he asked, remembering that Peggy was in the room.

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Greenfield, resigning herself to the inevitable. "I shall be glad to see Sir Guy Bertram."

Peggy said nothing, but if she had lifted her eyes from her needlework the others might have had reason to suppose that she too would be pleased to see Sir Guy Bertram.

CHAPTER XI

MR. RICHARDS IS DISPLEASED

A VERY agreeable and pleasant-mannered young man Sir Guy Bertram proved himself to be when he made his appearance at the cottage as the people were pouring out of the church close at hand on Sunday morning, whether sitting and talking in the shade of the little garden or at the early dinner in the low-ceiled dining-room. He talked a great deal to Mrs. Greenfield during the progress of the meal, and did not address himself very conspicuously to Peggy ; and George, remembering the lunch at Cambridge two years before, during which that young lady had been skilfully drawn out to take the leading part in the conversation, and observing her present somewhat demure attitude, pooh-poohed within himself his mother's fears. Mrs. Greenfield may probably have drawn a different conclusion from the altered state of things, but she also seemed to have thrown off the fears she had expressed, and at the end of the meal, when she and Peggy left the young men to their cigarettes, she seemed quite cheered by what was to her an unusual vent, for she lived very quietly at Highgate, and seldom ate a meal in any other company but that of George and Peggy.

" He is nice, mother, isn't he ? " said Peggy, putting her arm into that of the elder woman as they went into the parlour.

" Yes, dear," said Mrs. Greenfield. " But we mustn't expect to see him very often, you know. Young men like Sir Guy Bertram do not often visit at the houses of quiet people like ourselves, and we must be content to make our friends in our own class of life."

" Wherever he visits, I'm sure he doesn't often see ladies as nice as you," said Peggy, kissing her. " And I'm sure he isn't one of those people who make a great fuss about their titles," she added, out of her vast experience.

Jane, the neat little servant, recounting the course of events to a dapper young grocer's assistant, who accompanied her

in her afternoon walk, was of opinion that Guy was better-looking even than his photograph in the shop-windows.

"There he sat," she said, "just as it might be you, Augustus, and not a bit of pride neither. He passed the remark that it was a fine morning when I opened the door to him, as pleasant as possible. I thought he'd have given me a card to take in, and I had the salver ready and was all of a flutter. But he just said, 'Sir Guy Bertram,' quite simple like that, and Mr. George came in from the garden and took him out. And at dinner," continued Jane, who was of a loyal and affectionate character, "there was mistress sitting and talking quite calm, for all the world as if she'd been a lady of title herself. And it's my belief, Augustus, and say it I would though you was to take me to the block the next minute, that he's come here after our Miss Peggy. He pretended not to take much notice of her, and talked most to mistress and to Mr. George. But there, you can't take *me* in that way. I've got eyes in my head, though I says it as shouldn't, and I do say that, if it so happens, never do I wish to set eyes on a handsomer couple than them two."

"Ah, it's all good looks with you," said Augustus, who was not eminently favoured in that respect himself. "It was always Mr. George and his good looks. Now it's this Sir Guy Bertram who's cut him out."

"No, nor never will," said Jane decisively. "I always did say, and always will say, that Mr. George has got a noble 'ead, and now I've seen a Sir I don't think no different.. But lor'! Augustus," she added, pressing the arm of the despondent grocer, "what's all that to the likes of you and me? We knows our place, I suppose, and don't want to be no different. The first thing I think of when I get up of a Monday morning is, 'Only six more days to Sunday afternoon,' and the week goes so fast that when Sunday comes round I can 'ardly believe it."

"I know I'm not a toff," said Augustus, who liked this method of treatment, and was not unwilling to lay himself out for more of it. "I can't give you a 'ome with flunkeys and kerridges, Jenny," which led to a discussion of the kind of home he *could* give her, if things turned out well, and of the time when it might be expected to be forthcoming, and of what they would do when they got it, so that Augustus's soul was appeased, and Jane went back to the cottage at

the end of the afternoon determined to work harder than ever during the week, so that the time would slip the more quickly by and bring Sunday afternoon again.

Peggy, George, and Guy also set out for a walk on that Sunday afternoon to Hampstead Heath, that great high-lying common which Constable and Turner painted, and many artists and poets have loved, to say nothing of the great mass of work-a-day people, neither painters nor poets, possibly with little appreciation of either, but just city-bred folk of the commonest clay, who betake themselves there in their thousands and gain a little rest for brain and body in the wind and the sun and the spreading distance.

As they passed one of the old red brick houses near the cottage a white-haired old gentleman came out of the gate, attended by half a dozen young people.

"Why, what is this?" cried the old gentleman. "Peggy home again?"

They had to stop and merge themselves in the larger group, who were bound for the same place as themselves. Matters had to be explained in full to the old gentleman, and as it was not possible to walk all together down the somewhat crowded lane which led to the Heath, and the larger party had pairings of their own to make, Guy found himself walking with Peggy, while George was held in conversation by the old gentleman.

Peggy was quite friendly and confidential, and chattered like a lively magpie, but in a much more musical voice. She told Guy all about her life in Dresden, which she had loved, and her life in Paris, which she had loathed. She gave him the whole thrilling story of her flight, and expressed her determination not to budge a foot from Highgate, whatever view her father might take of her escapade. Guy was considerably amused.

"You don't seem to stand very much in awe of your parent," he observed.

"I don't know so much about that," replied Peggy. "To tell you the truth, I am rather afraid of him. Only he can't possibly know that if I don't show it, can he?"

"Of course not. Still somebody might tell him, and where would you be then?"

"Nobody knows except you, and you won't tell, will you?"

"Wild horses shouldn't drag it from me."

"And you'll see," said Peggy with a little nod, "I shall get my own way. Now," she added, "I have talked enough about myself. In fact, I think I have told you everything there is. It is your turn now to tell me something."

"What shall I tell you?" asked Guy.

"Oh, you have got heaps to tell. In fact, you are so much more important than I am that you ought really to have begun first. Do you know, they wouldn't believe me in Paris when I told them that I knew you. Tell me all about that lovely house and the gardens."

Guy described Merrilees to her at some length, and she listened intently.

"It all sounds very lovely," she said, when he had finished. "And to think of that poor Sir Roderick shutting himself up there all those years and letting no one share it with him! It was for love of his wife, wasn't it? The girls at Madame Guérin's said it was the most beautiful thing they had ever heard of. But I don't know. I think it would have been nobler of him to go on with his work in the world."

"He did that," said Guy. "He spent all those long years in writing a great book. There are piles and piles of manuscript all in his own writing. I saw them in the room where he spent most of his days. I don't know whether he ever meant it to be published. Some day I will show it to somebody—to George perhaps; he is a scholar—and take his advice about it."

"Ah!" said Peggy, very wisely. "I thought that a man like Sir Roderick could never bear to spend his days in idleness. I have read all I could about him, and everybody says that if he had remained in Parliament he would have become a very great man. I wonder you don't take more interest in his book. It must be something quite out of the common if he devoted himself to it all those years."

"I expect it is. But I have had other things to think about," said Guy.

Neither of them spoke of the unexplained mystery of the disappearance of Sir Roderick's body, though it was in the background of their minds. Perhaps it was to escape mention of it, although no such caution was necessary, that Peggy asked rather hurriedly.

"Aren't you simply enraged with that terrible man for stealing all those jewels?"

"Well, do you know," said Guy, "I am getting over it. Certainly it was a jar to think that one was going to be very rich and live in a place like that, and then to find that one couldn't after all. But I claim to be something of a philosopher. I may get it all some day, but in the meantime I persuade myself that I don't very much want to live at Merrilees. In fact, I am rather excited at present about living somewhere else. I am going to build myself a cottage in Surrey. Shall I tell you about that?"

"Oh, do, please," said Peggy. "Is it anywhere near Leith Hill? I went there once with George."

"Yes, it is quite near. I have found a piece of land on the edge of a pine wood, with a lovely view." And Guy told her all about a roomy bachelor cottage he had designed for himself, with a large hall, and a room for books, and a room for meals, and half a dozen bedrooms for himself and his friends, and a garden which would be beautiful from the first, but never finished in the making.

"It all sounds too lovely for words," said Peggy, when he had finished. "I couldn't help thinking about the other place that everything had been done for you. It was so perfect that there was nothing more to do. But this—oh, you *will* enjoy it! And tell me, what are you going to do in your beautiful little house?"

"Do in it? Why, live in it."

"Yes, but you can't do nothing all day long."

"I shall find lots to amuse myself with. There will be the garden for one thing, and indoors I shall have books and music, and I paint a bit, you know. Then there will always be somebody staying with me, or nearly always. And if I get bored, which may very well happen when it rains, and I can't get anybody to keep me company—well, I can go away for a bit."

"But, you know, I don't think a life like that can be quite good for you," said Peggy sagely. "It means doing nothing but amuse yourself all day and every day. I think everybody ought to do something, even if they are well off."

"I was asked to stand for Parliament once," said Guy with a laugh, "but that wouldn't have suited me at all. I haven't got ambitions like George. I daresay I should be all the better if I had."

"We can't all do the same things," replied Peggy. "And we can't all get to the top of the tree. The branches

wouldn't hold us. But I can't help feeling there is something out of the many things you know about that you ought to be able to do seriously."

"Well, perhaps there is," said Guy. "If I had had to work for my living I think I should have chosen to be a painter."

"Well, there!" said Peggy triumphantly. "Then why don't you go in for that, and become a great painter? You have more chances than other people."

"I didn't say I could be a great painter. I don't think I could."

"But you could try to be, and I'm sure you would be much happier if you had an object in life."

"I'm not particularly unhappy now. No, Miss Peggy, I'm one of the few people—I believe there are only a few of them—who thoroughly enjoy doing nothing in particular. I daresay I should enjoy doing something in particular equally, but it is rather late in the day to try now."

Thereupon Peggy began to plead that it was not at all too late, and showed such earnestness in the arguments she produced, arguments with Guy lightly combated, and such wisdom in urging them, that she appeared in quite a new aspect and, if possible, a more captivating one than ever, and they got on so well together that they never once looked back towards George and the old gentleman, and never realised, until they came out upon the Heath and stood under the great firs to look at the distant view, that they had left their companions half a mile behind.

After resting for a while they parted from the old gentleman and his following and walked back another way through the fields to Highgate.

"Excuse me for leaving you to yourselves," said George, with no attempt at irony, when they were alone again, "but that old boy was rather interesting. He was in Parliament for twenty years, and has a lot to talk about."

When they reached the cottage Guy held open the gate for Peggy to go through. She went up the garden path and then turned suddenly.

"Oh, George, there's father!" she exclaimed, laying a hand on his arm and speaking in a tone of sudden fright. Through the open window of the room looking towards the front Mrs. Greenfield could be seen sitting in conversation with a man who turned a dark face on them.

"Do go in first, George," Peggy whispered. She had

forgotten all about Guy for the moment, but George turned towards him in some embarrassment.

"I think I had better be going," Guy said. "I am dining out to-night, and I must go and get hold of my bag."

"Well, we've got to get this business over," said George, smiling down at Peggy, who still held his arm. "So good-bye, Guy. I'm very glad you came up after all."

"And I'm very glad Mrs. Greenfield is better," said Guy. "Good-bye, Miss Peggy." He held her hand a little longer than was absolutely necessary, and Peggy felt that she was being somehow assisted in the crisis that lay before her. The little gate clicked behind Guy, and George and Peggy went into the house.

There was a very black look on Mr. Richards's face when they went into the room where he was sitting with Mrs. Greenfield, but it was turned more towards George than Peggy. He kissed Peggy, however, and shook hands with George without giving vent to his obvious displeasure.

"You can go away now, Peggy," he said. "I will speak to you later."

When Peggy had left the room he turned to George.

"What is that young man doing here?" he asked.

Hostility, fully aroused, looked out of George's eyes.

"What right have you to ask that question, Mr. Richards?" he said, facing him squarely.

Mr. Richards looked nonplussed for the moment. Then he made a gesture as if brushing away an obstacle.

"I told you what it would be six years ago," he said.

"You would make friends with the idlers. This young man has never done a stroke of honest work in his life. Everybody knows that. Why do you want to make friends with a man like that?"

"Again I ask," said George, "by what right do you criticise me and my friends? What in the world has it got to do with you whom I make friends with?"

"I am an old friend of your mother's, and, I hope, a true friend. And I have entrusted my daughter to her care."

"That doesn't give you the right to dictate to us whom we shall ask to this house."

"It gives me the right to take my daughter away if I object to the people who come here."

"Are we to take that as a threat?" inquired George, with a curl of the lip.

"You can take it as you please," said Mr. Richards roughly. "I'm not going to have this man coming here as long as my girl remains in the house. You can choose between them."

"George dear," broke in Mrs. Greenfield, who had been standing by in great distress, "I have told Mr. Richards exactly how it was that Sir Guy Bertram came, that you had already consented not to ask him again, and had tried to put him off to-day."

"Then if you have been told that, sir," said George, hotly, "why do you take this bullying tone with me about it? Do you want to drive me into saying that I refuse to make any such compact with you, when you have heard that I have already consented to what you wish because my mother asked me?"

"I want to make certain that that man doesn't come here again," said Mr. Richards, doggedly.

"Then you are going the wrong way to get what you want," said George. "I am not a boy to be ordered to do this or that by a man whose authority I entirely disclaim. There is nobody in the world, Mr. Richards, who takes the tone with me that you do, and there are very few people from whom I should take such a tone less kindly."

"He says he will let Peggy stay with me, George," said Mrs. Greenfield, "if you will promise that Sir Guy Bertram does not come here."

"Very well, then," said George, "if Mr. Richards wants such a promise out of me let him recognise that he is asking a good deal, and let him ask it as one man of another, and not lay his commands upon me in the peremptory manner he sees fit to employ."

"Look here, George," said Mr. Richards, roughly, but not unkindly, "you seem to want to make an enemy of me."

"Not at all," said George. "For Peggy's sake and my mother's sake, and for my own sake too as far as their happiness is concerned, I should wish to keep on friendly terms with you as far as possible. But it isn't possible as long as you take up that hectoring tone with me."

"Well, let me finish. You've got so far above us with all your friends that you take amiss what is only meant for plainness. I know what I mean, and I'm accustomed to say it without picking and choosing my words. As between man and man, I've nothing but respect for you."

You have got on in the world as far as a young man could at your age, and I hope by-and-bye you will reap the reward of all your hard work and sticking to it. If I speak to you in a way you don't like you must put it down to an elderly man's way with a young man he's known from a baby. It's nothing more than that."

George was somewhat mollified by this speech, but not entirely.

"I accept what you say, of course," he answered, "but, at the same time, what I object to in your attitude towards me is something more than the manner of your speech, and I can't pretend that I shall ever receive it with anything but resistance. However, the point now is that you want a promise from me which I have already given to my mother. I have no objection to repeating it to you if it is to keep Peggy with us. I won't ask Bertram here again. The fact that he came to-day was an accident. I had already written to put him off."

Mr. Richards had not taken this speech without a darkening of face. It is probable that he had never in his life gone nearer to any apology, and he may have expected his overtures to be accepted without any reservation. He broke in now.

"That sort of accident mustn't happen again, then. I want a definite promise that under no circumstances shall that young man come to this house while my daughter is in it."

George looked at him somewhat curiously.

"Why is it always 'that young man'?" he asked. "What do you know of Guy Bertram that you have taken such a violent prejudice against him?"

"I haven't taken a prejudice against him. I don't care anything about him one way or the other."

"Well, I do. He's my friend, and I don't choose my friends from amongst the wasters, as you seem to imagine. He's a man anybody might be pleased to know. Why do you make such a point of his never meeting Peggy?"

"That's my business. You're sharp enough in sticking to what you call your rights. I'll stick to mine. If he comes here again Peggy leaves this house with no more said about it. And she leaves it for good."

"How would you have prevented his coming to-day if you had been in my place?"

"I should have met him at the door and told him he wasn't wanted."

"Oh, would you? Well, I'm afraid such a course isn't open to me, nor, I should think, to anybody with the feelings of a gentleman. If that is the kind of thing you want I'm afraid you will have to take Peggy away, for you won't get a promise of such behaviour from me."

"Well, we've talked long enough," said Mr. Richards, impatiently. "I don't care how you do it. You can find some way that'll suit you, or you can leave it alone. I'll give you three days to decide. I don't want to send Peggy away from your mother, but I shall do so unless I get your definite written promise by Wednesday morning. You have got the matter in your own hands. And now, Mr. George Greenfield, as I'm not in my own house, may I ask you to be good enough to send my daughter to me?"

"Always a pleasure to do anything for you, Mr. Richards," said George.

The two men looked at each other as George went out of the room. Mutual antagonism showed itself plainly, and it might have been prophesied that on any future occasion on which they should chance to find themselves opposed there would be no quarter given by either. It might also have been safely said that the older man would not be likely again to address however slight an appeal for consideration to the younger.

"Now, my girl," said Mr. Richards, when Peggy stood in his presence, "we can't have goings on like this, you know. You are not old enough by a good many years yet to decide what you are to do and what you are not to do. If you weren't happy at school, why didn't you write and ask if you could come back, instead of taking matters into your own hands, eh?"

"Because I was determined to come home, and I thought you might not let me if I asked," answered Peggy.

"Oh, that was it, was it?" said Mr. Richards. "Well, you wouldn't be much better off if I determined to send you back, would you?"

Peggy opposed a rebellious face of this query, but made no answer.

"I'm not going to send you back," continued her father. "At least, I hope I shan't have to. Schooling in a place like Paris is expensive, and if you are determined not to learn

I've got better use for my money than to spend it in trying to make you. The schooling is your loss, not mine, and you have had enough for all practical purposes. So you see you have not got such an unreasonable father, have you ? ”

“ No,” said Peggy somewhat doubtfully.

“ How would you like to come and live with me up north ? ” asked Mr. Richards.

Peggy cast a frightened look at him.

“ Oh, father, you don't want me to, do you ? ” she said.

“ I don't know that I do yet,” said Mr. Richards frankly.

“ What I may want later on is another matter. Your proper home would be with your father, I suppose, if he has got one to offer you ? ”

“ Then why haven't I always had it, father ? I have never once been inside your house. They do want me here always, and at any time. This has always been my home, and I love it and want to stay here.”

“ I intend that you shall stay here for a time, that is, if a certain stipulation that I have asked for from Mr. George is made—not unless.”

“ What stipulation ? ”

Mr. Richards was silent for a space.

“ I hadn't intended to tell you,” he said. “ But I don't know why I shouldn't. George has got to promise me that that young gentleman who has been here to-day shall not come here again.”

Peggy blushed a fiery red, none the paler because her father's eye was on her.

“ Why shouldn't Sir Guy Bertram come here, father ? ” she asked. “ He is George's friend.”

“ And yours too, young woman, eh ? I don't intend that that shall be, and if you have let that young man creep inside your heart you had better get him out again as quickly as may be.”

Poor Peggy, wounded alike in her pride and her modesty by this rude tearing down of a veil behind which she had hardly dared to peep herself, burst into tears.

“ How can you say such things, father ? ” she cried. “ As if I had ever—— ! Oh, I hope I shall never see Sir Guy Bertram again.”

“ I'll take good care that you don't,” said Mr. Richards as he left the room.

Although he had succeeded in making each member of

the little household at Highgate ill at ease, and two of them at least thoroughly angry, Mr. Richards, in pursuit of his purpose, proceeded to make a further effort yet.

He was anxious not to be obliged to take Peggy away from Highgate, but doubted whether George would give him the promise he had stipulated for. Being therefore a man of action, possessing very little delicacy of feeling, and no innate objection to making himself disagreeable to anybody whatever, it occurred to him that the best way to settle up the matter once for all and to get it off his mind was to go and see the person whom he wished to exclude from Peggy's society himself. Having thus decided, Mr. Richards let no grass grow under his feet, and Guy had not been in his rooms an hour after returning from Highgate when he was intensely astonished to receive a visit from the man whose face he had seen through the window of the cottage, who apparently claimed to control the goings and comings of his wayward little friend Peggy.

"You don't know anything about me," said Mr. Richards, when he had been accommodated with a chair, "and you may take somewhat amiss what I am going to say to you. So I will make it as short and plain as possible. My young daughter has had the honour of making your acquaintance. I don't wish that acquaintance to go any further."

"Well, really!" exclaimed Guy, in utter astonishment, "that's a funny thing to come and say to an entire stranger."

"Perhaps it is," replied Mr. Richards, in no wise abashed. "But I believe in saying a thing straight out if I've got to say it at all. I've no objection to your making friends with George Greenfield or his mother if you want to, or, if I have, I can't very well say so. But I *have* got authority over my own daughter, and if you can't see your way to keeping clear of Mrs. Greenfield's house while she is in it I shall have to take her away, which I don't want, and she doesn't want; in fact, nobody wants."

"Have you made this suggestion—that I shall keep clear of Mrs. Greenfield's house, as you put it—to her and her son?"

"Yes, I have."

"I see. And as they probably feel some natural delicacy in communicating your wishes to me, you have decided to do it yourself."

"If you want a thing done, do it yourself. That's my principle."

"No matter how damned impudent it is! I see."

"You don't pick your language, neither you nor your friend George Greenfield," said Mr. Richards, with a lowering look at him.

"This is hardly an occasion for picking language. You have said what you had to say in the way that suited you best, and a very unpleasant way it is. You must kindly allow me to do the same."

"I'm not often spoken to in that way."

"No, nor I," rejoined Guy, who was getting more and more angry. "And I'll take very good care I never am again when once this interview is over. What is it you object to in me, I should like to know, that you should come here and tell me I'm not fit to be in the same house as your daughter—a girl I've spoken to three times in my life, and with as much respect as I should use to my own mother if she were alive?"

"I don't object to anything in you particularly," said Mr. Richards, "except that you are in a different class of life from me and my daughter, and I don't choose that she shall have her head turned."

"Very well, then, you can have the promise you want. I won't go near Mrs. Greenfield's house while your daughter is there. And now you'd better clear out of my room, please, or I shall lose my temper."

"You seem to have done that already," said Mr. Richards, rising. "I suppose I can rely on you keeping your promise!"

"You can suppose what you like," answered the infuriated Guy, "as long as you get out of my room."

Mr. Richards took his departure, leaving Guy to walk up and down in no amiable mood until it was time to dress for dinner, when his anger began to cool down, and he gradually realised that it was rather a serious thing for him to have cut himself off so entirely from all possibility of enjoying Peggy's society for the future. This feeling grew upon him during the evening until, by the time he went to bed, he had come to the point of wishing that he had received Mr. Richards, who, insupportable man as he was, was still Peggy's father, in a rather more conciliatory spirit.

CHAPTER XII

MERRILEES AGAIN

CALTHORP and Messrs. Walters and Venable, of Lombard Street, lost no time in settling up the details of Lord Caradoc's tenancy of Merrilees. There was no discussion about the rent to be paid. Calthorp had, in fact, on his own responsibility, added on another two hundred a year to the terms he had been prepared to offer, and Lord Caradoc's lawyers had closed at once, having received instructions to agree to whatever sum was asked, provided there should be no delay in taking possession. The Ffoulkes Library itself was an irresistible attraction. Calthorp might have doubled the rent without endangering the negotiations.

A few days after Mr. Richards's invasion of his privacy Guy received a letter from Cicely Caradoc to the effect that her father had asked her to say that all preliminaries had been settled, and that he wished to transfer his establishment to Merrilees at the end of the following week; also that Lord Caradoc would be pleased if Guy would lunch with them on the following day, and, if he could do so, would he kindly come at half-past one, so that Mrs. Herbert could have half an hour's talk with him before luncheon about certain details.

"I don't know who Mrs. Herbert may be," said Guy, "or why she can't talk after luncheon as well as before, but Sir Guy Bertram accepts with pleasure Miss Caradoc's kind invitation."

The person to whom he addressed these words was Mr. Calthorp, who, arrayed in clothes which King Solomon might have envied if he had lived in the nineteenth century and curbed his Oriental tastes, was sitting solemnly in Guy's room, his eyeglass screwed firmly into his impassive face.

"I suggest," said Calthorp, "the propriety of your falling in love with Miss Caradoc. Her father's financial position is entirely sound, and the young lady herself struck me as possessing eminent attractions."

"She's an extraordinarily pretty child," said Guy.
"But I'm not falling in love at the present moment."

"Or possibly you are with somebody else," returned the astute Calthorp, "and are proof in this particular quarter. Well, I have done my duty as your legal adviser in recommending your attention to an undoubted heiress, in whom it struck me that you had aroused some interest the other day."

"There is nobody in whom I don't arouse interest just at present," said Guy. "It is in process of calming down a bit, I'm happy to say. But I suppose I shall have to submit to being stared at for some time longer, unless the mystery is cleared up, when I shall be once more left to myself. Is there anything fresh?"

"Yes, there is. On my way from the toils of the law to the haunts of pleasure I dropped in to give you two small pieces of information."

"You haven't found the jewels?" asked Guy eagerly.

"I'm sorry to say we have found nothing. But we have seen Martin in London."

"Have you got hold of him?"

"Unfortunately not. When I say we have seen him, I mean nothing more than that he has been seen. A gentleman called John Friend, who lately filled the position of second footman at Merrilees, paid us a visit this morning and informed us that he had seen Mr. Martin driving through the city in a hansom, as cool as you please."

"Why on earth didn't he stop him?"

"Well, he was on the top of an omnibus, and he hadn't got his lasso with him."

"Didn't he get down?"

"He did, as quickly as possible. In fact, he was quite keen. There is a small matter of five hundred pounds to be earned by putting salt on Martin's tail, and Mr. Friend explained that, to use his own words, he could do with it. But by the time he had alighted and found another cab he had lost sight of his quarry, and in his excitement he had omitted to take the number of Martin's hansom."

"What a fool the fellow must be!"

"He admitted as much himself with a considerable amount of remorse."

"He might have shouted directly he saw him. Every-

body would have been on the go in an instant, and we should have caught the fellow."

"He might have done that, or several other things, but unfortunately he didn't. And the most foolish thing he did was to delay coming to us with his information until this morning. It was on Monday that he saw Martin, four days ago. If he had come to us at once we might have been able to get on to his track. The cab was going west, and there was a Gladstone bag on the top. I should have routed up Scotland Yard at once and got them to make inquiries at all the terminus stations."

"What an idiot the fellow must be! Is he quite sure it was Martin?"

"He doesn't admit a doubt on the subject. He says that he should have known Martin anywhere. He says, too, that Martin looked up and he thinks he recognised him."

"He's got a pretty good nerve to ride about London in broad daylight just now."

"I don't deny the gentleman's nerve, or even impudence; but if he has become so careless over his own safety as soon as this, it ought not to be very long before we lay our hands on him."

"Then if he has smuggled the body out of England he has done what he wanted to do and come back again."

"I don't think he has smuggled the body out of England. That was only an idea that was just worth following up. We must have hit upon a trail of some sort by this time if he had tried to do it."

"What was the other piece of news you spoke about?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't help us to anything. But it is curious. We have found out where Lady Bertram died. It was at Foligno, a town about ten miles from Assisi, on the way to Rome. And the date was that given in the notice in the *Times*. The circumstances are remembered in the place. Sir Roderick's party was travelling by road, and they left Assisi on March 13th. Lady Bertram was unexpectedly confined on the following day. She was taken to an inn at Foligno, and died there in childbirth."

"Have they found her grave there?"

"No, she was not buried at Foligno. Her body was coffined and taken away two days afterwards. They have

not yet succeeded in tracing the route they took, but no doubt they will."

"It looks as if he had meant to take her body back to England."

"Yes, but we know he didn't, at least, not to Merrilees. You remember Mrs. Cheetham describing how he came home alone with Martin and walked into the house as if nothing had happened. And Martin spoke afterwards of Lady Bertram's being buried in Italy."

"Yes, at Assisi."

"Quite so. I take your point. But it doesn't much matter whether his lie only covered one town or the whole of the country. However, we shall follow up the trail. There is one other discrepancy to be noticed. The *Times* notice implies, if it does not actually state, that the child died on the same day as the mother. But it didn't. It was alive, and apparently very lustily so, when they left Foligno, two days after Lady Bertram's death."

"What do you make of that?"

"Nothing much. The *Times* notice was not inserted until about a fortnight later, and the child probably died somewhere on the route."

"Or didn't die at all. We shall be having a claimant turning up next who will turn me out of what Martin *has* in his kindness left for me to enjoy."

"Well, I rather think not. That sort of thing doesn't happen except in books."

"No. And a man shutting himself up in his house for twenty-five years, and turning a large fortune into precious stones, and his body mysteriously disappearing after his death—that sort of thing don't happen except in books; or so you would be inclined to say."

"I take your point," said Calthorp again. "However, I don't think you need be alarmed in this instance. The child died all right, and we shall find out where very soon, I hope. And now, my young friend and most respected client, I must be going."

"Oh, don't go yet. Come and dine with me somewhere."

"Thank you. I'm taking a little light refreshment to-night with George Greenfield. We shall discuss this matter in all its bearings, and the keen brain of that rising barrister will perhaps be able to throw some light on

places at present in darkness. George Greenfield takes an intelligent interest in all that concerns Sir Roderick Bertram and Mr. Martin."

And without further words Mr. Calthorp took his departure.

The next morning Guy betook himself to Lord Caradoc's house in Berkeley Square and asked for Miss Caradoc. He was shown into a pleasant morning room where Cicely was sitting with an elderly lady who was busy with account books at a table in the window.

Mrs. Herbert had occupied an important position in Lord Caradoc's household ever since the death of his wife. She had come, in the first instance, to look after Cicely, being an offset of the Conder stock, from whom Lord Caradoc's wife had also sprung, but had speedily put herself at the head of affairs at Treglith Rectory, and had so ably overlooked Treglith parish that the rector had had nothing to do but conduct two services a week in the church. When the rectory was exchanged for the large house in Berkeley Square, Mrs. Herbert had shown herself in no way at a loss, but had taken up the reins with as ready a capability as before, and it is to be doubted whether there was a better conducted household within the five-mile radius than that occupied by Lord Caradoc, his daughter, and herself. She was a pleasant-looking woman of middle age. Benignity beamed through her round spectacles, decision ruled the firm lines of her mouth, and order and neatness were apparent in her dress and all about her.

Cicely looked rather pale and languid, as if the heat of a London July were too much for her, but there was nothing that a week of country breezes would not put right, and Guy could not help admiring her sweet girlish face and slender form in its simple white frock as she came forward to greet him.

Mrs. Herbert, introduced by Cicely, plunged at once into her subject, which had to do with servants, both outdoor and indoor, for Mrs. Herbert apparently had the oversight of everything and was as ready to take the ordering of stables and gardens into her capable hands as to exercise supervision over larder and pantry.

"The house seems to be so well stocked with everything we can possibly want," she said, when she had subjected Guy to a searching cross-examination, "that it will be very

easy to move into. I have the inventory here. You are taking away a few things, I think, Sir Guy ? ”

“ I made up a list of everything I should want for the house I am going to build,” said Guy, “ furniture, pictures, and everything. That has been agreed to by Lord Caradoc’s lawyers. But the house is so full that what I shall take away will hardly be missed.”

“ That is very satisfactory. If you will give me the housekeeper’s name I will write to her about various small details, and I shall send most of the servants down on Friday. Lord Caradoc proposes that we shall go on Saturday. Then I think that is all I need trouble you with, Sir Guy. Thank you. Cicely dear, will you take care of Sir Guy till lunch-time ? ”

Mrs. Herbert gathered up her papers and her basket of keys and left the room.

“ Do you mind very much letting your house to us ? ” asked Cicely when they were alone together.

Guy took up his position on the hearth-rug and smiled down upon her protectingly. “ My dear Miss Caradoc,” he said, “ I would rather let it to you than anybody. You won’t break the furniture, you know, or kick the paint, which I believe are the chief occupations of the typical tenant.”

“ We shall like living there, I am sure. But don’t you hate letting it to anybody ? ”

“ Well, you see, I can’t live there myself. And, besides, I am getting so very keen on my own building arrangements.” And he told her, as he had already told Peggy, of his plans for his Surrey cottage.

Cicely received them with less enthusiasm than Peggy had done. “ It sounds very nice,” she said. “ But it will not be the same as Merrilees.”

Guy remembered that Peggy had thought that on the whole it would be nicer, and a shade of melancholy crept over his face at the recollection. Cicely, observing it, was confirmed in her opinion that the letting of Merrilees was a great sorrow to him, a sorrow which he was bravely hiding from the eyes of the world.

Lord Caradoc, dug out of the drift of books and papers in the midst of which he had spent his morning, and animated by thoughts of the Ffoulkes Library, had less difficulty than usual in bringing his thoughts into line with

present-day surroundings, and asked many questions about Merrilees, its house and its gardens. He was evidently pleased and a little excited at the thought of living there, and he had entirely forgotten, even if he had ever actually realised, the occurrences which had made Merrilees of late the most talked-of house in the three kingdoms.

"How would it suit you, Sir Guy," he asked towards the end of luncheon, "to travel down with us on Saturday and put us in the way of things?"

Guy was somewhat taken back by the suddenness of this invitation.

"It would be very nice if you could," said Cicely, shyly.

Guy rapidly reviewed the situation. He was getting rather tired of the London season, which would soon be past its prime, and the beauties of his own house of Merrilees had impressed him more than he was inclined to acknowledge, now that he had made over his rights in it for the present. Perhaps if he had not had that disagreeable interview with Mr. Richards a few days before he might not have wished to leave London so soon. But it was no use thinking of that now.

"You are very kind indeed," he said. "I am afraid I could hardly get away quite so soon as Saturday, but towards the end of next week, if your invitation is still open, I should very much like to come down for a few days."

So it came to pass that a week later Guy Bertram found himself once more speeding north in a corridor train, this time with only his thoughts to keep him company.

Those thoughts were not very cheerful. He left London in a thorough downpour of rain, which bore him company all through the Midlands. The low-lying clouds showed never a break of blue sky, and the dismal swish and patter of the raindrops on the window of his compartment turned his thoughts to melancholy. He thought about Peggy. He had thought a great deal about Peggy during the last week. Before Mr. Richards had paid him that unwelcome visit it would never have occurred to him to ask himself whether he was in love with her. He had only seen her three times in his life, and she had not filled any great part of his thoughts between whiles. He had enjoyed her company, as he had often enjoyed the company of a pretty, lively girl, and, looking back on that Sunday afternoon, he

was inclined to think that he had enjoyed it considerably more than he had been aware of at the time. If matters had taken their ordinary course he might have tried to make opportunities of meeting her again, but he would probably not have desired them very greatly, and if she had been sent away again for a considerable time his appreciation of the pleasures of life would have been in no way lessened, and she might have dropped out of his mind completely. His resentment at Mr. Richards's implications of a more than usual interest in the girl on his part had been genuine, and had arisen not because he had felt such an interest and disliked to have it dragged into the light of day, but because, so far as he knew his own mind the unusual interest had not existed.

But to deny a young man of Guy's nature anything that he finds in any degree attractive is the very way to make him desire it all the more, as Mr. Richards might have known, if he had been as wise as he thought himself; and during the past week Guy had certainly desired very much to see Peggy, and had regretted his easily given promise that he would not endeavour to do so, regretted rather that the promise had been exacted, for it was difficult to see how he could have acted otherwise than he had done under the spur of Mr. Richards's unwarrantable behaviour.

He had not seen George, nor heard from him, and he supposed, as was indeed the case, that Mr. Richards had not disclosed the fact of his visit to St. James's Street. He wondered what George would say when he heard of it, and he wondered still more what Peggy would think if she knew how easily he had allowed himself to promise that he would never go near her again, so easily as to imply that he didn't care whether he went near her or not.

With a nature like Guy's, easily elated and easily depressed, one uncomfortable thought is apt to bring another with it. He had been a spoilt child of fortune, and by reason of his clean and wholesome, if somewhat dilettante, tastes, he had not suffered those mental reversals which pleasure-lovers as well and better off than he are apt to be assailed by. Satisfaction with his earthly lot, or rather unthinking acceptance of it as a matter of course, had been his normal attitude, and seasons of depression rare and fleeting. But the capacity for gloomy outlooks was there, and gloom now descended upon him as he thought of

Merrilees and the pleasurable anticipation with which he had journeyed this same road a few weeks before. As a matter of fact, he had been quite honest in saying that the loss of a large fortune had not troubled him much, since he had been enabled to take in hand something that he had set his heart upon. He had allowed the thought of Merrilees and his inheritance to be obscured by an agreeable plan which would give him considerable pleasure in the undertaking. But in his present mood he was inclined to despise himself for fixing his thoughts on a toy and not taking more to heart the loss of what would make life so much more amusing than anything he could have hoped for. A cottage in Surrey and rooms in London were all very well for a bachelor; but supposing he wished to marry! His present income, even with Merrilees constantly let, would not give him the position in the world that he desired. So at least he thought in his present downcast mood, a mood black enough to obscure all hope of eventually recovering his fortune.

The train flashed through a country station. Some subtle connection of thought turned his mind towards Sir Roderick, whose sudden death had coloured his thoughts during his last journey. What an unaccountable thing the disappearance of his body had been! Interest in the startling occurrence, burning for some time at white heat, had cooled down in the public mind, and after the first week or so, during which its connection with the robbery of the jewels had kept it alive in his mind, it had taken no large part in his thoughts. He had never known his cousin, and the mysterious disappearance of his dead body had caused him no personal distress beyond the first shock of the news. And yet he could not help feeling that a cloud lay over the place to which he was going, a cloud of mystery and melancholy, and he wondered that it had so apparently slight an effect on the people who had now made the island house their home. Would the mystery ever be cleared up? Would there be some gruesome discovery in the house itself or in the gardens, or on the shores of the lake, which would turn that lovely place into a scene of horror, and darken the remembrance of it to the young girl whose home it had now become? Everything had been done that could have been done, but they were no nearer to a solution of the mystery than before.

Ah! That reminded him! He had received a letter from Calthorp just before leaving his rooms, which he had put with others into his pocket, intending to read them in the train. He opened it now.

"My dear Guy," it ran, "we have made further discoveries in Italy, which I may as well communicate to you, although they do not, unfortunately, lead to anything.

"Lady Bertram was not buried in Italy at all. Her body was taken down to the coast and put on board a yacht which Sir Roderick had apparently hired for the purpose. Where she sailed for we have not yet discovered, but it was probably for England, as Sir Roderick was at Merrilees less than a fortnight later. We shall hope to trace her within a short time.

"The child died the day after the departure of the party from Foligno. It was buried at Spoleto, which is the next place they would reach on their journey to the coast. There is a stone, and it bears the inscription 'To the memory of the Infant Son of Sir Roderick Bertram, 8th Baronet, of Merrilees, Cumberland. Born March 14th, 18—. Died March 17th, 18—.' That is all."

And that was all of Calthorp's letter, which ended abruptly with a "Yours sincerely."

"Well, that relieves us of anxiety about the 'rightful heir,'" said Guy to himself. "Poor little beggar! He would have been in my shoes if he had lived, and I hope they would have fitted him."

A gleam of sunshine, the first he had seen that day, made the raindrops on the windows sparkle, and with the hurrying clouds away went Guy's melancholy. His spirits sprang to the opposite extreme, and before he had reached Preston he had already decided upon the party he would ask to a house-warming at Merrilees when Lord Caradoc's tenancy should have expired, and he himself should finally take up his residence there.

By the time he reached Keswick it was nearly dark. The old coachman, who had been transferred to the service of Lord Caradoc, smiled down on him from the same stately seat, but the plebeian horses he had driven before had been replaced by a pair of powerful, well-bred greys. Guy wondered whether Mrs. Herbert had already reorganised the stables, for he felt sure that Lord Caradoc could never have done so.

The long drive in the clear, rain-washed air, with the stars shining out of a cloudless sky, was pleasant enough after the long train journey. Once more he passed the little wood and the whitewashed cottages, rumbled down the loose stony hill and through the park gates to the borders of the lake. The boat was waiting for him at the jetty, and in the stern were two cloaked figures, who turned out to be Cicely and Mrs. Herbert.

"We have come across to welcome you," said the older lady as he stepped into the boat. "We have been kept indoors all day by the rain, and the lake looked so lovely in the starlight that we could not resist the excitement of a little expedition."

Guy felt unaccountably cheered by their companionship. The dreary influences of the place had begun to close round him again during the latter part of the drive, and he had been looking forward with discomfort to putting out across the dark water away from the lights and bustle of the shore. But everything was changed while this nice elderly lady chatted commonplaces and the girl holding the rudder lines by his side steered a somewhat erratic course towards the island.

They went up the terraces from the lake laughing and talking and into the lighted hall. Lord Caradoc had torn himself away from the fascination of the Ffoulkes Library, which had held him in its grip all day long, to welcome his guest, but soon excused himself and left the ladies to entertain him over a late supper, and Guy went to sleep in his old room with very different feelings from those with which he had occupied it last.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GREAT WORK

LORD CARADOC had breakfasted when Guy made his appearance the next morning, but Cicely and Mrs. Herbert were awaiting him in the breakfast parlour.

"Father has hardly stirred out of the library since we have been here," said Cicely. "We went over to Morthwaite to church on Sunday morning, and after luncheon I got him to walk round the gardens with me. He was delighted, and said that Sir Roderick must have been a great gardener. Later on I expect he will spend a good deal of his time out of doors, but at present the library has greater attractions for him."

The morning was wet. Guy finished his after-breakfast pipe in the smoking room, and stood at the window watching the raindrops jump on the paved walks of the Dutch garden, and wondering what on earth he could find to do with himself. The morning papers would not arrive until twelve o'clock on the following day, which left a considerable time to be filled up. The alternatives were a novel, a game of patience, or an invasion of the privacy of the ladies. "I wonder whether Miss Cicely can read music well enough to make it worth while asking her to play some duets, and whether there are any here," he was saying to himself, when the door opened, and Cicely came in. Apparently she was as much in need of distraction as he was, and in her youth and innocence she seemed so ready to make friends that Guy felt pleased at the thought of her companionship.

"Shall we go over the house?" she said. "There is a great deal to see, and I waited for you to show it me."

"Haven't you been in all the rooms yet?"

"No, only a few of them."

"That will be just the thing for a wet morning, then. Come along. The house is a sort of South Kensington Museum of art treasures, and I can't pretend to be a very good guide to them. But I will do my best. There really

ought to be a catalogue. All the materials for it are upstairs. Now, where shall we begin ? ”

They began with the great drawing-room, the room which Guy told Cicely had been in constant preparation as if for the use of the dearly loved lady who had been dead five-and-twenty years.

“ The morning-room was just the same, Mrs. Cheetham told me,” said Cicely in a low voice, “ the room next door, that Mrs. Herbert and I use. And there are rooms upstairs which were hers too. I haven’t been into them yet.”

“ Those have been kept exactly as they were when she last used them,” said Guy. “ These have been altered a good deal since. Many of these pictures and the other beautiful things have been bought since she died. But, as you see, they have not been put in anyhow. It is just as if he had enriched the room for her sake ; and it was always kept open, as if it might be used at any time.”

They spent some time examining the pictures, the cabinets of china, the enamels, and the beautiful pieces of stately furniture, for which it seemed as if all parts of the globe had been ransacked. Guy knew something about such things, and he was surprised to find that Cicely knew a good deal too. It appeared that Mrs. Herbert, that woman so admirably equipped for all contingencies, had taken her regularly to the treasure-chambers at South Kensington, and insisted on a systematic study of their contents.

“ It was instead of German,” explained Cicely, “ which I always hated.”

From the big drawing-room they passed into the music-room leading out of it, where there was an organ, which had not been used for the quarter of a century during which this great beautiful house had enshrined the dreams and regrets of one lonely man. But it had been kept in order, and the room had resounded once a year to the discordant shrieks and hoots of the tuner. Here they found a whole library of music, and it appeared that Cicely had been accustomed to playing those admirable arrangements for the piano of the works of the great masters, symphonies, operas, and chamber music.

“ With Mrs. Herbert ? ” inquired Guy. “ She seems to know and do everything.”

“ She can’t do that,” said Cicely, with a smile. “ I wish she could, because I shall miss it now. Mary Conder used

to come and play duets with me. She doesn't play very well, but she was always nice about it, and didn't mind playing wrong notes a bit."

"Oh, well, that's something," said Guy, encouragingly.

"She was rather too strong for me," admitted Cicely.

"I always made her play the treble, because, if she played the bass, I could never hear what I was doing. But she couldn't keep to her own part of the piano, and was always digging chips out of me with her little finger-nail."

"Yes, she's a thoroughly nice, kind-hearted girl, Mary Conder," said Guy, "always willing to oblige, and that's more than you can say of everybody. But all the Conders are that. Bobby would give the nose off his face to anybody he thought might want it. I shouldn't myself, because there's not enough of it, certainly not enough for two. Look here, Miss Cicely, do you see that cabinet? That is full of the finest collection of mezzotints I have seen outside the British Museum. What they are worth now I couldn't say, probably about twenty times what my cousin gave for them. I'm afraid I have taken a good many of them away for my cottage, but there are plenty left, and we will go over them some day or other."

Leading out of the music-room was another smaller drawing-room and a conservatory filled with flowers. There were more cabinets in this room, full of beautiful, priceless things, which they examined together, comparing their slender stock of knowledge.

"I'll tell you what," said Guy, glancing at the glass dome of the conservatory, on which the rain was dropping ceaselessly. "Shall we begin to make a catalogue of these things while I am here? There isn't one that I know of, but there is all the information in books upstairs. It would be interesting work, and would give us something to do when we are tired of playing duets on a wet morning like this."

Cicely assented eagerly, as she would have done to anything that Guy had suggested, and that was how the "Catalogue of the Contents of Merrilees, Cumberland," came to be compiled, of which a hundred copies, printed on hand-made paper and bound in vellum, were afterwards issued, and are prized by collectors. Cicely had eventually to finish the compilation with the assistance of Mrs. Herbert, for they did not get very far during Guy's brief visit.

They went upstairs still discussing their plan, and into Lady Bertram's rooms. The first was a boudoir over the morning room. It was not so full of furniture as the rooms downstairs, but it gave a more intimate impression of human occupancy. It seemed impossible that it should never have been used during those many years. There was a little low chair drawn up close to the fireplace, and a work-table by its side. On one of the tables was an embroidery frame with a half-finished design, and the needles and the skeins of silk still attached to it. Books were scattered about on other tables, old-fashioned books in rich bindings. There was a guitar hanging on the wall, and a tall harp in one corner with many broken strings. A square piano stood near a window, open, with an Italian song on the music stand. The keys were discoloured, and as Guy touched them they gave a melancholy, discordant note. No tuner had been allowed to enter this sacred room. An empty bird-cage stood on a stand near the fireplace, and an empty basket with a little rug was on the floor beside it.

"Mrs. Cheetham always dusted these rooms herself," said Guy; "and no one ever entered them but she and Sir Roderick. His wife died abroad, you know, but when he came back he had everything arranged just as when she had last used them, and so they have remained ever since."

They went through the poor lady's dressing-room and the big bedroom beyond, and came out again subdued and saddened by the impression of ever-abiding loss which the rooms conveyed, so natural with their tale of life and yet telling so strangely of that life long since cut off.

"We will leave them just as they are," said Cicely. "I don't suppose we shall ever have the house so full that we shall want them, and there are plenty of others."

Sir Roderick's rooms on the floor above were also shut up. They went past the big bedroom where he had died, but Guy took Cicely into the dressing-room and showed her the books in which the purchases were recorded of the things they would enter in their catalogue.

"This is the old part of the house," he said, as they opened the door at the end of the corridor. "It is very old indeed, and was built in times when they used to fortify their houses. I don't know who it belonged to then."

Sir Michael, who practically rebuilt the house, was the first Bertram who lived here."

They found themselves at the head of a turret stair enclosed in immense thickness of solid stone. This part of the house was of some extent, but was hidden from the south by the long front of Italian architecture. There were stone passages and stairways, little rooms with groined ceilings, mostly unfurnished or containing discarded pieces of heavy and old-fashioned lumber. They went up the turret stair and out on to the roof, which was entirely shaded and hidden by the great trees that grew up to the very walls.

They went down again, and on the ground floor came across a little old chapel, dark and gloomy, with a stone altar marked with five crosses. Otherwise it was quite empty, and the dust of ages lay in the corners and on the remains of rude carvings.

"I wonder when this was last used," said Guy. "Centuries ago, I expect. I know nothing of the early history of the house."

"Someone has been here lately," said Cicely, pointing to the stone floor, upon which the dust and dirt had been recently disturbed.

"Someone has been everywhere, all over the house," said Guy. "I doubt whether there is a corner that has not been ransacked. Let us go and see the west wing."

A heavy oak door, studded with nails, led out of the remains of this mediæval fortress into an addition of more recent, but still ancient times. The outer walls were partly the same, but the interior was full of oak-panelled rooms, with plastered ceilings and great open fireplaces rich with carvings.

"This is pure Elizabethan," said Guy. "I wish there was more of it. With the exception of the breakfast parlour and the smoking room, it has been given up entirely to the servants. I think if I ever came to live here I should rescue some of the rooms. This panelling is very fine, and it is nearly all in perfect preservation. Sir Michael, with his Italian tastes, could hardly be expected to appreciate it; but he evidently had the good sense to leave it as it was. Come upstairs, and I will show you something interesting."

They mounted by a massive oak staircase to the second

floor, and Guy led the way into the dark little room which had been Martin's. The doors of the great iron safe stared at them from the wall, startlingly incongruous.

"This is where the great hoard of jewels was kept," said Guy. "You may imagine my feelings when we opened it and found it empty."

He pushed back the heavy door and disclosed the rows of baize-covered shelves that had held treasures of almost fabulous value, beside which the varied contents of the rest of the house sank into insignificance.

They looked in at the telling emptiness. "Come along," said Guy, turning away. "It gives me the blues. Let us go and make music."

But the duets had to be postponed for that morning. The butler waylaid them at the door of the music-room with a request that Sir Guy would kindly step into the library and speak to his lordship.

Lord Caradoc was discovered in a state of suppressed excitement, which, if he had been a man of anything but a very spare "habit of body," might have led to an attack of apoplexy. He was pacing up and down the great library.

"Come in here ; come in here," he cried, as his guest entered, and darted into the inner room with head bent, like a rabbit bolting into his hole. Guy followed him with his heart in his mouth.

There were two smaller rooms opening out of the great library. The first was a working room with all the appliances for learned toil. The second was devoted to that famous collection of books, the Ffoulkes Library. It was lined with books from floor to ceiling, and a little railed gallery ran round it half-way up. It was furnished with a severe-looking writing table, a few chairs, and a cabinet of many drawers. It was into this room and up to this cabinet that Lord Caradoc led his wondering guest.

"I have made a discovery, a great discovery," he said, rubbing his hands and peering through his glasses at Guy. "I thought you told me you had been through Sir Roderick's papers in this room and found nothing of importance ?"

"I looked through them rather cursorily," replied Guy ; "but I don't think I overlooked anything."

"Nothing of importance ?" whispered Lord Caradoc in a

voice of shocked surprise. "My dear young friend, do you know that in those drawers lies a work which the world has been waiting for many years—the work which I myself have been engaged on to the best of my small powers now for some time past, but with what limited powers compared with the genius shown here?"

He took a great bundle of closely written manuscript out of one of the drawers of the cabinet, and laid it on the table with trembling and reverent hands. Guy was too disappointed to speak, and stood immersed in regretful thought while Lord Caradoc went rambling on.

"It is my own subject," he said, "'The History of England's Foreign Policy,' I found it early this morning, and have looked casually through it. It has been written under serious disadvantages, which would have prevented a lesser man from undertaking such a stupendous task. Access to original documents has been to a great extent impossible, almost entirely so with the exception of the period for which these books and papers"—he waved his hand towards the shelves—"are indispensable. There are letters and papers in this library bearing on the policy of Carteret, for instance, which have never yet seen the light, and for that period the work which I have in my hands will create the biggest sensation of the day. And for the whole period covered—and the work, as far as I can judge, is completed—although certain sources of information have been closed for the writer, and there are mistakes and inaccuracies, the grasp, the insight, the master-mind displayed here, fill me with astonishment—I might almost say with praise and thanksgiving," added Lord Caradoc, with a dim remembrance of clerical aspirations.

"My own researches have been amply acknowledged," he continued with lively satisfaction. "But to glance at this precious work makes me feel a mere day labourer in the field. On one point I have come across I am contradicted and set right. I bow before the judgment. Oh, the wit and intelligence brought to bear on my poor error! Nothing bitter—too much deference, if anything, to one so conspicuously lacking in all that is truly great. Oh for a few hours' conversation with such a man! I followed him, I remember, in my young days, followed his career with interest, and may perhaps have conversed with him; I do

not recollect. But the ripeness of judgment, the fruit borne—I should never have expected to see such a thing. I can only bow my head before such a mind, and such a task accomplished.”

Lord Caradoc might have gone on in this laudatory strain for another hour. He had evidently been aroused out of his usual calm by the discovery he had made, and was talking more to himself than to Guy. Guy, who had somewhat recovered from his disappointment at the disclosure of the nature of Lord Caradoc's discovery, and whose thoughts had been busy during the foregoing speech, interrupted it now to ask :

“ Is this—this work finished ? ”

“ As far as I can see, a period has been put to it,” replied Lord Caradoc. “ A chapter might have to be written, of which the substance is already set down, and a certain amount of expert work would be required to prepare it for the press, but there is nothing that a far less original mind might not undertake with success.”

“ This is how my cousin spent his days and his years shut up here,” said Guy, “ and, as with everything else in his arrangements, the end of this year was to see it all completed.”

Lord Caradoc ignored this remark. “ No time ought to be lost in publishing this for the benefit of the world,” he said. “ It will undoubtedly make a sensation. If you are willing, I propose to put my other work aside for the present and devote myself to preparing these valuable documents for publication.”

“ That would be a great honour, Lord Caradoc.”

This polite acknowledgment of his undoubted eminence in the field of historical research seemed to cause Lord Caradoc pain.

“ Tut, tut ! ” he replied. “ There could be no talk of such a thing. The honour would be mine. I should write an introduction, and a few notes where opinions expressed would doubtless have been modified in the light of recent knowledge. I should have no wish to arrogate to myself any of the glory that must accrue to the memory of the author of such a work. What I should like would be to ask a competent scholar to assist me in the details of revision. There is an immense pile of manuscript, of which this is a very small part, to go through. I cannot at present

bring to mind any young rising scholar to whom I could apply. Have you anyone in your mind to whom you would care to entrust such a work ? ”

Guy, whose historical knowledge was confined chiefly to a few details in the lives of King Alfred, King Henry, and the Duke of Clarence, in connection with cakes, lampreys, and Malmsey wine, was about to reply in the negative when he bethought himself.

“ I think I do know of a man,” he said, and mentioned George Greenfield.

“ Oh yes,” said Lord Caradoc. “ His name is familiar to me. I read an essay of his, which I think won a University prize, with very great interest. It was immature, perhaps, but showed undoubted grasp of his subject, and, I think, the true historical spirit. You could not have mentioned anyone more satisfactory. Would he undertake it, do you think ? ”

“ He is always full of work ; but I could write and ask him. He is not very well off, I believe.”

“ I should expect, of course, to reimburse him liberally for his loss of time,” said Lord Caradoc, and he mentioned a sum so handsome that Guy could only feel overcome by deputy at his generosity. “ I should like to work with a young man of such ability, and you may tell him, I think, from me that it will be of some advantage to him for his name to be connected with such a work as this. I should wish, if I might suggest it, that you should write to Mr. Greenfield to-day, and the sooner we set to work the better.”

Guy wrote to George that afternoon and informed him of the great discovery, the importance of which, he said, he took from Lord Caradoc, not being a judge of such matters himself, and proposed that George should come to Merrilees forthwith.

George, delighted enough at the proposal, replied that he would be able to devote the following month to Lord Caradoc's service, and would come to Merrilees in a week from that time. Lord Caradoc, having been even more struck than he had acknowledged by the brilliance of the essay which had come under his notice, was made exceedingly content, and Guy returned to London just before George's arrival, delighted at having pleased Lord Caradoc and done a service to his friend.

CHAPTER XIV

GUY BERTRAM MAKES A PROMISE

POOR little Peggy, so rudely disturbed in the recesses of her maidenly soul by her father's words, took little pleasure in her newly acquired emancipation. George had taken no step, and proposed to take none, to comply with Mr. Richards's demands, but a letter had reached Mrs. Greenfield early in the week from Glasgow, stating shortly that Mr. Richards did not think there was much chance of Sir Guy Bertram's coming again to the cottage unless he were asked, and, as he understood that he would not be asked, Peggy might stay on at Highgate.

Relieved by this decision, the girl tried to take the pleasure in her home life which she had anticipated for herself. But, truth to tell, that life was very dull for her. George was at home but little, and towards the end of July left London altogether to work with Lord Caradoc at Merrilees.

Very nearly he had written to beg off his engagement. When he had told his mother of it, she had grown pale and frightened, as, alas! he had so often seen her do of late, and besought him not to go. She was not well, she said, and could not bear the thought of such a separation; but on being pressed she had calmed down, denied that there was anything the matter with her, and finally reproached herself with selfishness in trying to keep him back from something that would be of advantage to him.

In truth, it was plain to see that she was anxious and depressed, and George would willingly have stayed by her if he could have helped her to a more tranquil frame of mind. But she made an effort to disguise her state, became cheerful and tranquil as before in his presence and laughed at her previous fears.

"You cannot do me any good by staying here," she said. "And if trouble—if illness comes, it will come. And you will always come to me, I know, if I want you."

So George went, only half at ease in his mind, and

directly he had gone Mrs. Greenfield fell back into her troubled mood, and although she would tell Peggy nothing of what was on her mind and did her best to hide the anxieties that were wearing her down, she was not in a state to tranquillise a girl oppressed for the first time in her life by questionings and fears which she was able neither to define nor to avoid.

With Peggy, as with Guy, the rude dragging into the light of what at most lay germinating in the heart of each had forced her to examine herself, and from her self-examination she had gained nothing but disquietude and distress. She had friends in Highgate, friends of her own age, both girls and boys, but she took little pleasure in their society, and still less in the quiet but no longer tranquil life of the cottage. She found herself often walking along the lane, as little crowded on a weekday as a country road, which led to the Heath, where she had been so happy and light-hearted on that Sunday afternoon, pouring her own little plans and hopes into Guy's friendly ear and listening with so much pleasure to those he imparted to her in return. If her home life had been cheerful and gay at this time, and if she had been surrounded by the distractions which take a young girl's thoughts away from inward broodings, she might soon have got over the unpleasant shock of her father's interference. As it was, she brooded on it, and Guy, the cause of it, was never out of her mind for long together.

As for Guy himself, he was almost in a worse case. A man, especially a young man, who has not kept a very careful guard over his impulses and has never been seriously bitten by passion, does not treat the thought of love as an impertinent intrusion. He is rather inclined to meet it with open arms as a new and delightful experience. And Guy, if before his interview with Mr. Richards he would have scouted the idea of being in love with Peggy, was now very sure that he was so, and suffered accordingly.

When he returned from his visit to Merrilees he found London nearly deserted. He went down to Surrey, as he had intended, and overlooked the first staking out of his garden and the laying of the foundations of his house. But after three days or so he found this very dull work. Matters progressed with irritating slowness, he could not be hanging about his new property all day with his hands

in his pockets, the cottage rooms he had taken were lonely in the extreme, and, as it happened, he knew none of the people who lived in the immediate neighbourhood. He found himself thrown back on his own thoughts, and his thoughts led him to Peggy. He cursed his folly in promising unconditionally not to see her again.

A week after his return from Merrilees he found himself again in his rooms at St. James's and on the next morning he took himself and his thoughts to the Heath, to the place where he had stood under the firs with Peggy and looked at the distant view. He had promised that he would not go to Highgate. The Heath was not Highgate. He had promised that he would not try to see Peggy, and this was not trying to see her ; but by this time he knew very well that he was in love with her, and he felt that it would afford him some consolation to visit a place of which the attraction consisted in having visited it first in her company. He sat on a seat under the firs for an hour, looking round every now and then towards the lane which led up to those breezy heights from Highgate, and wondering what he should do if a youthful figure, which was now always present in his mind, should appear, coming towards him from amongst the trees.

By-and-by he began to feel a little ashamed of himself. Other people had come from the direction of Highgate and looked at him questioningly, and, as it seemed to him, suspiciously, as if they must have known what he was there for ; and the invasion of a party of chattering school-girls, one of whom evidently recognised him and whispered to her companions, causing them to regard him with hushed delight, gave him cause to remember the penalties of notoriety.

He walked back across the Heath and drove back to St. James's Street, declaring to himself that he would go abroad and recover his independence of mind.

The next morning, because it was fine and still, he told himself that the view from the firs would be better worth looking at than ever, and again he made his way thither. He took a detour and approached the plateau on which the firs stood from behind some thick bushes. As he came out into the open he saw Peggy standing before him on the spot on which they had stood together a month before, gazing out over the blue distance with a look on her face

that made his heart beat. She turned and saw him, and the light that sprang into her eyes and flooded her face drove away any lingering doubts he may have possessed that she was the one girl in all the world whom he wanted for his own.

Their greeting was awkward enough. It was so obvious, however he might have tried to deceive himself, that Guy had come there simply and solely on the chance of seeing her, that he could find nothing to say. And Peggy's face had told so plainly that she was overjoyed to see him, that no words were possible to her but those which told of her confusion. They stood side by side, each trying to reduce to order the tumult of their thoughts.

"I promised your father that I would not try to see you," said Guy at last in a husky voice.

"My father?" exclaimed Peggy with a deep blush, caused by the remembrance of her father's words to her.

"Yes," said Guy. "He came to see me on that Sunday evening. I was very angry with him for what he had said, and I am afraid I was rather rude. I was taken by surprise."

"Oh, I wish he hadn't said anything to you," said Peggy in deep distress.

"Come and let us sit down," said Guy, indicating a seat near at hand.

"I mustn't," said Peggy, irresolutely. "If you—oh, I don't know what to do."

Her confusion and distress had the effect of making Guy master of himself. "I am not sorry your father came to me," he said. "It has only made me say sooner what I should have said later in any case. I have been thinking of you ever since, little Peggy, and I can't do without you. I love you with my whole heart."

The happiness his words brought her, piercing through the trouble of her mind, was too much for Peggy. She hid her face in her hands and cried. Guy took hold of her hands and comforted her with murmured words of love.

"I ought not to listen to you," said Peggy, smiling at him through her tears. "But I can't help it."

"Of course you can't help it, darling," said Guy, tenderly. "It was meant that we should love each other the first time we met, wasn't it?"

"I don't know," said Peggy. "I thought you were very nice the first time we met."

"And I thought you were adorable," said Guy, looking back on the past through the glasses of the present.

They sat under the firs for some time longer, perfectly happy in their new-found love. The girl looked no further forward than the present delightful moment. The man remembered that there was something more to be done.

"What shall I say to your father for having stolen your heart, my darling?" inquired Guy when he had sufficiently assured himself that he had it.

Peggy, recalled from the heights of Paradise, instantly grew troubled again. "Must you—when shall you see him?" she asked anxiously.

"He is in Glasgow, isn't he? I shall go up to-night and tell him I want you for my very own."

"Must you go so soon?"

"Yes. I've got no rights in you yet, my sweet Peggy. I want to come and see you at Highgate every day of my life, and I am under a promise not to come to Highgate at all at present. I ought not to be seen here, I suppose; but I shall have to point out to your father that the place is under the jurisdiction of the London County Council and is free to all. I happened to meet you here, and having met you, well, what could I do but tell you I loved you?"

"I am afraid father will be angry."

"Not a bit. He said he didn't want your head turned, though who am I that I should have the power to turn that dear little head? Have I turned it, Peggy?"

"Towards yourself, I think," said Peggy shyly.

An interlude—witnessed only by a blind man at the corner of Hampstead Lane and his Toby dog, but by them with interest.

"Well, you see, your head being already turned in my direction," explained Guy, "my keeping away from you would only turn it again, and that he doesn't want."

"Shall I tell mother?" asked Peggy, already willing to put herself completely into his hands.

"Yes, tell her, and tell George; or shall I tell George?"

"He has gone up to Merrilees," Peggy reminded him.

"So he has. I don't know that I won't look in on Merrilees on my way from Glasgow. No, I won't. That would keep me a day longer from you, Peggy. I will write to George when I have seen your father."

So Peggy went back to Highgate after a lingering

farewell, at the corner of the lane, during which the blind man affected a supreme unconsciousness and his dog barked encouragingly ; and Guy drove back to London with a heart full of love and joy.

Once more he went hurrying north, this time by night, and the next morning found him breakfasting at St. Enoch's Hotel in the city of Glasgow. Peggy had given him her father's address, and with no delay he set out to find that redoubtable man of business.

To say that he had no qualms concerning his forthcoming interview would not be strictly true. He remembered how he had angrily ordered Mr. Richards out of his rooms on the only occasion on which they had hitherto met, and he acknowledged to himself that his previous attitude would need some tactful ignoring. Of the main results of his mission doubts troubled him little. In spite of the uncertainty attaching to his possible fortune, it had been made plain to him of late that he was considered matrimonially eligible in the mart of fashionable London, and although Peggy was a princess among girls, the mental criticism which it was impossible to apply to her he had already allowed to play upon the social position of her father. The very ground the man had taken up in issuing his veto against their meeting one another showed that the idea of Guy's wanting to marry his daughter had not occurred to him. When he should tell him that that was what he did want it was probable that a business man, evidently not of the first rank, would be gratified at the thought of such a match for his daughter. Peggy had told him that she had hardly seen her father fifty times in the course of her life, so that he could not very well object to her being taken away from him, and Guy remembered that Mr. Richards had said that he had no objections to him personally, as, indeed, why should he have, knowing nothing about him but what everybody was at liberty to know ? It was on the awkwardness of the meeting that his doubts exercised themselves, not on its final result.

Mr. Richards had left the house where he lived, a dull little house in a dull little street, some time before for his office, to which Guy was directed. " McDougall, Richards & Co." was the style of the firm, and insurance broking its business, though what special occupation came under that

description Guy had not the faintest idea. Whatever it might be, the firm of McDougall, Richards & Co. were apparently doing well at it, for they occupied the first floor of a house of considerable size in one of the busiest streets of the commercial part of the city, and the counting-house was full of clerks. Guy sent in his card and was presently conducted into a room where Mr. Richards sat writing on one side of a large table and Mr. McDougall on the other. The latter gentleman, with a look of some interest at his partner's visitor, left the room, and Guy was left alone with Mr. Richards, who motioned him to a chair and waited in silence to hear what he had to say. The business man on his own ground, breaking off in the middle of important and mysterious dealings with the great world of commerce, and evidently anxious to return to them again, had his visitor at some disadvantage, and Guy experienced a sensation of being once more *in statu pupillari* interviewed by his tutor on some breach of college discipline.

"I have seen your daughter," began Guy, rather awkwardly, for he had not sufficiently rehearsed the gambits of his conversation. A look of annoyance passed over Mr. Richards's face, and Guy hastened to add that he had met her on Hampstead Heath while he was walking there.

"Do you often walk on Hampstead Heath?" inquired Mr. Richards.

"No," replied Guy. "At any rate I have come straight up here to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

Mr. Richards was evidently taken by surprise, and was not able entirely to hide it. He cast a quick look at Guy from under raised brows and turned sharply in his seat. He seemed at a loss to know what to say, so said something disagreeable.

"You have come up here to ask my permission to propose to my daughter?"

Guy turned off the sneer with the straightforward truth. "I have already proposed to her," he said. "I have come to ask your permission to marry her."

"You have already proposed to her, although you promised me not to see or speak to her again?"

"I didn't quite promise that, but I hope you will put that question aside and consider that I love your daughter, and she loves me. You can make any inquiries about me

you like. If you give your consent to our engagement I will do my very best to make her happy, and—and I shall consider myself a very fortunate man.”

It might have been thought that this straightforward and on the whole modest speech would have given Mr. Richards some cause for self-congratulation, and that *he* might have considered himself a fortunate man in securing a good-looking young baronet of irreproachable manners as a suitor for his daughter's hand. He did not, however, show himself overcome by the honour that was being done him.

“What is your financial position?” he asked shortly.

“I suppose everybody knows the rather extraordinary position in which I stand at present,” said Guy. “As you are probably aware, I am the heir of a very rich man, the bulk of whose property had been converted into precious stones, which have unfortunately been stolen.”

“Well, I do know that.” But if you are depending for an income on property which you state has been stolen, which *you* will never have the fingering of at any rate, you can't call your position a very stable one.”

“I am not depending on that for an income. I have about fifteen hundred a year besides, or shall have when my money is all invested, and I have a house which is at present let for twelve hundred a year.”

“For how much?”

“Twelve hundred a year. It is let furnished to Lord Caradoc on a yearly tenancy, and he is not likely to want to give it up. In fact, I think he would like to buy it.”

“And would you like to sell it?” Mr. Richards asked the question with a thinly veiled sneer, but Guy's eyes were downward, and he did not notice it.

“Not at present,” he said. “I am building a little house of my own. I should make it rather larger if I were married, and with the income I possess, apart from any question of the bulk of my fortune, I should be able to live there in a quiet way, perfectly free from anxiety.”

Mr. Richards sat turning over in his mind what he had heard. Guy studied his face meanwhile. It was not an amiable face by any means, and its owner was not a gentleman in any sense of the word which Guy would have been likely to use. It struck him as somewhat incongruous that he should be awaiting the decision of such a

man on such a question with anxiety. But Peggy was worth it, and he swallowed his pride. He even allowed his thoughts to leap forward and thought of the telegram he would send to Peggy, and of how he would fly down to Highgate as fast as steam and horseflesh could take him when once this disagreeable interview was over.

Mr. Richards looked up at him as if he had been considering a proposition having to do with insurance broking, and had decided on his course of action.

"Well, I must refuse your offer," he said.

Guy looked at him in amazement, his dreams rudely disturbed.

"Surely you will give me some reason?" he stammered.

"I don't know why I should," replied Mr. Richards.

"I think it is owing to me," said Guy, collecting his thoughts and preparing himself to fight for what was of such importance to him.

"Well, perhaps it is. You have made me a straightforward proposal. I pass over the fact of your going behind your word and speaking to my daughter first. That is done now, and she will have to suffer for it. I daresay I ought to consider myself honoured by a proposal for her from a gentleman in your position. It's a higher one than mine, whatever happens. But there are things I put before position. What work have you ever done in your life? How have you used your time and your opportunities? You are about twenty-six, I suppose. What have you ever done but amuse yourself?"

Guy saw in a flash of insight the point of view of a man who had made his own way in the world, his ideals and objects, and his dislike of men to whom the good things of life come with no labour on their part. He set himself to do justice to this point of view and to meet it.

"I daresay I must seem to you an idle and useless fellow," he said quietly. "Perhaps I am. But I have never been obliged to work to make a living, and you may easily assure yourself that I have not made a bad use of my money and my time, if I have not made a very good one."

"That's all very well, but it wouldn't help you much if you found yourself without any money at all. What did you live on before—before you came into this property?"

"I had an allowance from my cousin."

"And what would you have done if he had stopped your

allowance, or left his money to somebody else, as he might very well have done for all you knew ? ”

“ I don’t know. The question never arose. I was his only living relative, and directly my father died he made me this allowance, which was to last, I suppose, and did last, until I succeeded him.”

“ You never saw your cousin ? ”

“ Not since I can remember. But there was nothing odd in that. He shut himself up in his house the year after I was born, and saw nobody.”

“ Well, as I say, supposing he had left his property away from you ? ”

“ He had no power to leave the house away from me.”

“ The house ! The house brings in nothing.”

“ I beg your pardon. It brings in twelve hundred a year. And it is only to be supposed, as he recognised me as his heir—indeed, he couldn’t help it—that——”

“ Supposing he had married again and had a son of his own, what should you have done then ? ” interrupted the other.

“ Well, you see, Mr. Richards, none of these unfortunate things happened, or were likely to happen, my cousin being what he was. The question is, surely, not what I should have done in the event of having to work for my living, but whether, being sufficiently provided for, as it turned out, I have done anything to make me unworthy to marry your daughter.”

Mr. Richards rose and paced the room, it seemed to Guy, in some agitation.

“ I can’t allow it, and you must take that as final,” he said at last, reseating himself. “ If you were to lose your money to-morrow you wouldn’t be able to earn enough to keep yourself, much less a wife. From the point of view of a business man, you are good for nothing.”

“ Oh, but really,” said Guy, now beginning to get alarmed, “ all that is surely absolutely beside the mark. I am not in the least likely to lose my money, or any part of it. I am much more likely to find a very great deal more. My income will be perfectly safely invested—you can have all the information you want as to that—and my house in Cumberland is so full of treasures that if I were to sell only a part of its contents I should get enough to make me a rich man.”

"You can't sell them."

"I don't know what you mean by saying that. I could sell everything if I wanted to. But I don't want to. I have got enough without. And why should you expect that your daughter should make a better marriage from a financial point of view? Heaven knows I don't want to claim any superiority. In all that matters that's on her side. But you can't deny that an income getting on for three thousand a year would give her a good deal more than she has now, and I should say speaking perfectly plainly, more than you could give her yourself if she lived with you."

"I don't deny it. All I say is that your ideas and mine are so different that I can do nothing but refuse your offer, and I sha'n't change my mind if you sit and talk to me about it all day."

Guy had come to the end of his tether. He felt that nothing he could say would break down the obstinacy of the man opposed to him. "Is the happiness of your daughter nothing to you?" he asked.

"I am a better judge of what will cause my daughter's happiness than you are, or than she is at her age," answered Mr. Richards.

"I can't believe that you will refuse me on such grounds, such absurd grounds, as you take up," urged Guy.

"I am afraid you will have to believe it sooner or later," said Mr. Richards, "and the sooner the better for your sake. I have made up my mind, and nothing you can say will make me alter it."

Guy saw plainly that at present, at any rate, it was of no use trying. He rose from his chair. "I can't take such a refusal, Mr. Richards," he said. "It is in the highest degree unreasonable. I shall leave you to think it over, and shall come to you again."

"What I say, I say finally," replied the other doggedly.

"Even if I recover the very large property that has been stolen from me?"

Mr. Richards was silent for a moment. "If those jewels, or the greater part of them, ever come into your possession," he said, "I will—I will reconsider the matter. Let that content you. And until then I must ask for your definite promise that you do not hold any communication with my daughter whatever. That is plain enough,

and there must be no getting behind the promise this time."

"I can't make the promise. I made such a promise to you once, not knowing what I was doing, and I—if you like to say so—I broke it. If I met her again, as I did yesterday, I should speak to her. I couldn't help myself. This isn't a small matter to me. Besides," he continued more hotly, "why should I promise you anything? I know that she is ever so much too good for me in herself, but there are plenty of people, who could reasonably look for great matches for their daughters, who wouldn't refuse me if I went and told them what I have told you. With you it is a mere money bargain! If I become a very rich man you will 'reconsider the matter'! Until that happens you won't look at me. The fact that I love your daughter goes for nothing."

"Well, I take that back, then," said Mr. Richards, roughly, "I only said it because I don't think there's the slightest chance of your ever becoming a very rich man. And I didn't say I should give my consent then. No. I take that back definitely. It wouldn't be fair to the girl. And I tell you this, that if you don't undertake to hold no sort of communication with her whatever I'll send her away altogether. I've had enough of this, and I'll end it now—once for all."

"I won't promise you anything," said Guy.

"Then you may get out of my room as you tried to turn me out of yours. And I'll take very good care that you don't see my daughter again, whether you promise or not. She'll have to suffer for it, of course. But a lot you care for that!"

Guy came back into the room again. "If I promise what you want," he said in a low voice, "will you let me write to her once?"

"No, I won't. I will write to her myself. I'll have this business broken off now for good one way or the other. And, whichever way it is, you won't be the gainer. If you leave her alone she can stop where she is. If you won't she shall come here, and I shall keep a pretty sharp eye on her. You can make up your mind which it is to be, for I've no more time to waste."

And for poor little Peggy's sake Guy promised.

CHAPTER XV

“ YOU MUST BRING ME MORE ”

GEORGE GREENFIELD arrived at Merrilees on the evening of a day of wind and rain. As he alighted from the carriage that had brought him from the station and took his seat in the boat which was to bear him across the dark waters to the island, he thought he had never seen so gloomy a place. The rain drove in his face. Fallen leaves and broken boughs strewed the terraces up which he mounted to the house, standing dark and gloomy above him. The decaying touch of autumn was already laid on all the summer beauty.

George had lived his life in cities. His were the interests and pleasure of human intercourse, and he had rowed with the best of his fellows down the busy stream of life. It is true that he had the tastes of a sportsman, and was not ignorant of the more active pursuits of country life ; but the placidities of existence, far removed from the centres of living interest, had no attraction for him. His chief thought on his first approach to the beautiful house of Merrilees was of wonder that any man with active brain and intellect could possibly support life in such a place.

Dull the house of Merrilees might very well appear to a young man of perfect health and ardent ambitions, coming to it from a life of such mental activity as George had been leading. But to no one of ordinary intelligence and sensibility could its interior fail to appeal as something rare and exquisite, with whatever feelings he might enter it. George saw but few of its treasures on the first evening of his arrival, but what he did see made an impression on his mind all the greater for its being half unconscious. Lord Caradoc met him in the hall, and could hardly wait until he had changed his wet clothes and eaten a somewhat hasty supper before immersing himself and his guest in a discussion of the subject of which his mind was full. Seated in the inner library, he poured out a flood of the admiration with which Sir Roderick Bertram's great work

had inspired him. George caught something of his host's enthusiasm and showed it sufficiently to make Lord Caradoc congratulate himself, as he escorted him to his room at two o'clock in the morning, that he had chanced upon a fellow-worker of such ability.

George must have fallen asleep the moment his head touched the pillow, for he never stirred until he was awakened at eight o'clock the next morning by the servant moving about his room. The wind had died down completely during the night, and there was no cloud in the sky. The view which had so entranced Guy Bertram on his first awaking at Merrilees met George's eyes as he rose and stood at the open window. The late summer flowers made a brilliant setting to the stone carvings and balustrades, and the cascade splashed and sparkled its way down to the blue waters of the lake. It was not in the nature of youth to be unmoved by so much beauty. It suggested the thought that there was, after all, something to be said for life in such a place as Merrilees. The man who was waiting on him told him where to find the bathing place, and George ran down to the lake and swam far out into its cool waters.

As he climbed the stair again to the house after his swim, full of youth, health, and energy, he was a young man whom it was good to look upon. Probably no young man so handsome as George can be altogether unaware of his good looks, but it is safe to say that no one so generously treated by nature in this respect could have prided himself less on his advantages. The thought of marriage in the still remote future may sometimes have crossed his mind, and the prefatory process of falling in love may have occurred to him as an accident to which all men are more or less liable. But as for seeking opportunities of falling in love, George's life had hitherto been far too full to make such a pursuit either possible or attractive. And at this particular time in his life, when new interests and ambitions were thronging in on him, nothing can have been farther from his thoughts than the possibility of the image of a girl entering and holding them. But his time had come, and his freedom of mind was over.

As he ran, whistling, up the last flight of steps that led to the broad terrace in front of the house, he lifted his eyes and saw Cicely standing above him, a basket of flowers in

one hand, the other resting on the stone coping of the balustrade. He stopped suddenly and stood looking at her until a movement on her part recalled him to himself. Then he went forward and greeted her in a manner as commonplace as if, during those few moments, the whole conscious scheme of his life had not been changed. It was not her beauty that moved him, though she was beautiful. Who can say what there is in the eyes of a girl that bears no message for the many, but thrills the whole being of the one? Love at first sight is probably not so common an experience as might be supposed from a close acquaintance with the works of the novelists, but in the case of a man such as George Greenfield, whose mind has never run on thoughts of love, it may very well come thus, a bolt from the blue.

The time during which George had stood and looked at Cicely had been so short as to be scarcely noticeable. They shook hands and went into the house together, talking of the beauty of the morning and of the work which George had come to Merrilees to do.

He was glad enough to get away and be alone for a few minutes. He recognized what had befallen him and wanted to adapt his thoughts to it. But, as he finished his dressing in the room with the windows wide open towards the lake and the distant woods, he found that his thoughts refused to be reduced to order. It was too early yet. The event had been too sudden. All that he knew was that the lake sparkled more gloriously in the sun, the late summer woods took on the freshness of spring, and that all the work which he had set himself to do and which had hitherto engrossed his thoughts was as nothing to him beside a slip of a girl with blue eyes and corn-coloured hair; also that, try as he would, he could recall no single feature of her face.

All the morning he worked with Lord Caradoc. That eminent historian would have liked to work all the afternoon too, and all the evening, but restrained himself so far as to suggest to George that they might meet in the library again when it began to get dark, spend an hour over their papers until dinner-time, and another hour or so before they went to bed. George went up to his room again before luncheon and tried once more to reduce the new commotion in his blood into terms of aspiration and

resolve. But he could only think that in a few minutes he would be sitting at table with her, and only hope that the afternoon might be spent in her company.

At luncheon Mrs. Herbert suggested tea in a little thatched cottage, built for that purpose in the wood at the far end of the lake. George rowed them across. Mrs. Herbert sat in the verandah of the cottage, knitted, fell asleep, knitted and fell asleep again throughout the afternoon. George and Cicely walked by the lake and picked up shiny pebbles. When the time came they built a fire of sticks, boiled a kettle, and made tea with much ado. George had never felt so happy in all his life. The only drawback to his happiness was a feeling of nervousness as to whether he was talking as well as he could have wished. He had not experienced this nervousness when addressing public meetings, as he had occasionally done in pursuance of his political aims. On those occasions the desire to talk well had inspired him to success. The same desire now seemed only to reduce him to mere diffident banality. He had always found it very easy to amuse men with his conversation. What could he say that would put him on terms of friendship with this young girl?

He found himself envying some of his friends their ready social tact. Guy Bertram, for instance—how very quickly he had slipped into terms of intimacy with Peggy on that June day at Cambridge. He mentioned Guy Bertram, and found that here was a subject upon which he might talk with the certainty of full appreciation. He told Cicely the history of their friendship and incidents in it. She asked questions which showed her interest, and they were not confined entirely to the doings of Guy. Sops were thrown to the egotism of the lover, and eagerly seized. Feminine guile, innocent, unconscious even, pointed her share in the conversation, and George stretched his mental muscles at the end of it with a deep sigh of ecstasy.

As he worked far into the night with the indefatigable Lord Caradoc, his brain exercising its functions with practised dexterity, the memory of the afternoon hovered round him like a sweet odour, forcing itself now and then on his consciousness in wafts of delight.

The days repeated themselves, hard absorbing work in the mornings and the same at night, gliding hours of pleasure through the golden afternoons. Only a young

man strong mentally and physically or an old man trained to a life of active thought could have done the work that Lord Caradoc and George did during those weeks of August and September in the way they did it. George's brain had never been clearer nor his powers of concentration greater than during his hours of work. The effect of a true religion is to glorify man's actions by unifying their aim, and high love, the natural religion, carries with it this impulse towards perfection.

From the moment when he looked up and saw Cicely standing above him in the freshness of her young beauty George gave himself a willing victim to the strong influences of a first passion. The sweet surprises and discoveries, the long contents and sudden doubts, the deep humility and exultant pride, the hopes, the fears, the memories, of a lover, swept through his soul and made the month of his stay at Merrilees, while he lived through an eternity of emotional experience, pass like an hour in the fields of Paradise.

George was a man of action, and not likely to remain long under the spell of an indefinite emotion. It was characteristic of him that even in the early days, when the glamour of his wooing was strongest upon him, his cool judgment should have forced him to weigh his intentions and state to himself their aim. Certainly, for a young man with no prospects but those which were founded on what a more than average share of brains and ambitions might achieve in the future, the idea of a marriage with Lord Caradoc's heiress might be supposed to present obstacles of some magnitude. But distrust in his future achievements was a failing to which George was a stranger, and he judged Lord Caradoc rightly in thinking of him as one with whom lack of means on the part of a suitor for his daughter's hand would not weigh heavily, supposing there were no other disability. Lack of birth might prove a more serious obstacle, and George, who had been wont to plume himself on being “ one of the people,” found himself half wishing for a distinction surely in itself the least valuable a man can possess, but outweighing on certain occasions character, ability, beauty, and all the choicest gifts with which mankind can be dowered. But as he had hitherto suffered no inconveniences, in whatever society he might find himself, from his lack of an old and honour-

able name, he could not bring himself to believe that his hopes would be wrecked, because all that he meant to do in the world would be done without the assistance of high birth and connections. So he put it to himself, and hoped that Lord Caradoc's views would coincide with his own.

Perhaps, in describing George's relations with Cicely at this time, the word "wooing" is not the most fitting to apply to the attitude of a man who knows his own mind, but has not yet disclosed it, except to himself. And yet the attempt, by all means short of an open avowal of love, to gain a footing in the heart of another, so that the avowal may in time be made, is a not unimportant stage in the process of wooing. George, at any rate, could not have acted more wisely in his own interests than to lay himself out to gain Cicely's friendship and confidence without frightening that shy little maid by giving her a hint of what he was hoping for. And yet, alas for all the smoothness of their intercourse! her attitude towards him, becoming daily more friendly and confiding, and his absorption in her growing deeper and deeper, they were none the less at cross-purposes. When one of two mistakes growing friendship for dawning love, and the other full-grown love for growing friendship, and both are well content, it is a pity, perhaps, that things cannot remain for ever in such a state. But as love needs an avowal, and friendship is stronger without, development is inevitable, and it is perhaps curious that George and Cicely should have tasted such sweet content in one another's company for a month without a break.

But George's passion impelled him to an issue. Cicely's tranquil kindness and frank but equable pleasure in his society perhaps saved her from having her eyes opened by a sudden disclosure of passion. There was nothing to take him by storm and provoke the declaration which he would not willingly have made except in his own time and with full intention. And, with a girl so young and in some ways so far removed from him, the conviction grew upon him that he had no right to make his avowal to her without first asking the permission of her father.

George made his plea to Lord Caradoc one night in the little library. They had finished their work together that evening, and might well have congratulated themselves on the results of a month's arduous and concentrated toil as

the great pile of orderly manuscript lay before them, ready for the printers. And they had been so congratulating themselves, talking for hours on what they had accomplished and what the results of their work would be, until the lights in the great Florentine standards burned low and the September dawn glimmered through the curtains. To George, in the ardour of his happy youth, the month's work had been the fruit of a strong brain, testing its powers to the full. To the older man it had been a constant absorbing delight, to which every day of a long life of trained endeavour had contributed something. But it had brought him for the time being to the end of his powers of endurance, and even as he talked and tasted anticipations in the glow of a deed accomplished his weary brain was beginning to lose its grasp.

There had been silence for some minutes. Lord Caradoc had been sitting in his heavy oak chair, the very chair in which Sir Roderick had sat day after day for nearly half his life-time preparing what these two men were perhaps as capable of appreciating as any two men in England. They had loyally and enthusiastically put the finishing touch to his labours. And now the mind of one of them was slipping away from what had occupied it exclusively for some time past into vague irresponsible musings. The other had thrown off all remembrance of it and was nerving himself to shape a crisis in his own life.

George rose, and going to the window, drew back the curtains. The sad dawn lay grey over heavy trees and dew-drenched bushes in which birds were twittering in preparation for the coming day. The sound of the rings clattering on the metal pole roused Lord Caradoc, who sat up in his chair and passed his hand over his tired eyes. At the same moment George spoke.

“ I should like to say a few words to you on a personal matter,” he said, moistening his lips.

Lord Caradoc turned towards him, courteous as ever, but with his thoughts plainly astray. George had been trying during those few minutes to frame an opening to his plea, but in the gallop of his thoughts no words had come to him. He fell back on a stilted form.

“ I wish to ask you for the hand of your daughter.”

“ My daughter ? ” echoed Lord Caradoc, still quite at sea.

"I have loved her since the moment I first saw her," said George, gathering courage as he went on. "I know that I am not worthy of her—in any way. But I would devote my life to making her happy."

Lord Caradoc made an effort and gathered his wandering thoughts.

"You take me somewhat by surprise, Mr. Greenfield," he said. "I am hardly prepared—er—at this time to——" His words dwindled into embarrassed silence.

"I have chosen this time," said George, "because we have finished the work that we have been doing together, and there is nothing now to keep me here. I should like to go away with something to work for and hope for. I am young, and she is very young. I do not want to speak to her yet. I only want to know that I may do so when I have gained a position in life which I can offer her—along with myself."

Lord Caradoc was silent for many minutes, and George waited patiently until he should choose to break his silence. At last he began to speak, slowly, with long pauses between his sentences, as if his thoughts gathered clearness as he uttered them one by one.

"I confess that I had not thought of my daughter as of an age to—to marry," he said—"she is, if I remember rightly, barely eighteen—my wife was no older when I married her—I have no objection to early marriages—she will be very rich—I do not demand that the man she marries shall be rich—nor that he shall be of a rank equal to her own—provided that he be honourable—clean-living—and of unblemished birth—and that she loves him—you do not tell me that my daughter loves you." He threw an anxious glance at George.

"I do not know," said George. "I speak to you first." There was another long pause.

"Honourable, clean-living, and of unblemished birth," repeated Lord Caradoc. "I believe—I know you to be the first. Are you the second?"

"Yes," said George.

"Of your birth I know nothing," said Lord Caradoc, and waited.

George in his turn was silent. There came surging over him the remembrance of what Mr. Richards had told him of his father two years before, the shame of it, the conviction

that, despite his own upright youth, there clung to him a taint which no efforts of his could throw off. He had experienced something of the same feeling after he had first heard the story of his birth, but the effect of those disclosures had died down in his mind, and only at rare intervals arisen to trouble him. His home life had been so normal, his mother so much like the mothers of other men in their different stations, and he had relied so much on his own efforts and his own ability to make for himself a name and place in the world, that it had been impossible for him to brood over the facts of his mother's early history as they had come to him, or to feel them as affecting his own career. Even during the past month, in which he had thought so much of his position and prospects, the certainty that Lord Caradoc would put to him some such question as that to which he was now awaiting an answer had not occurred to him. In his happiness and in his eager outlook towards the future this one damning fact of the past had kept itself hidden from his thoughts. Afterwards he asked himself, in amazement, whether this could really have been so, but could not, on searching his memory, find that he had ever pictured himself as anything but a man by himself, whose value in the world was created by his own character and achievements. Incredible as it might appear, he could not remember having cast one thought back to his parentage, or considered it as affecting his chances.

But Lord Caradoc was waiting for his answer, and waiting now with some surprise at his silence.

“ My mother is alive,” he said. “ She is my only relation. She brought me up, and has done everything for me. I never saw my father. He left her before I was born.”

Lord Caradoc, now in complete possession of his faculties, looked at him in surprise.

“ You must know who he was,” he said. “ Your mother must have told you something.”

“ She has told me nothing,” said George, “ except that he was dead, and she did not wish to speak of him.”

The growing light of the September dawn seemed to compel absolute clearness and truthfulness of speech, without reserves and without glamour. Lord Caradoc remained immersed in thought for a long time, so that it seemed as

if his mind had again lost its hold of present realities. George's thoughts as he stood by the tall window, busy with the story of his birth, were coloured by an intense anxiety as to how the fact which had troubled him scarcely at all during his boyhood and early manhood, now realised with overwhelming force, would affect his life. At last Lord Caradoc rose from his chair and turned away from the yellow gleam of the candles on the table towards the cold light of the window. His face was drawn and thin. It was plain that he had come to the end of his powers.

"You must bring me more," he said.

When Cicely and Mrs. Herbert came down to breakfast that morning, they were informed by the old butler that Lord Caradoc was ill and could not leave his room, and that Mr. Greenfield had been driven to Keswick soon after six o'clock to catch the first train to London.

CHAPTER XVI

"LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT"

ALTHOUGH George had intended to leave Merrilees that day, he would not have gone so hurriedly, nor without bidding good-bye to Mrs. Herbert and Cicely, had he not received a telegram dated the evening before from Peggy.

"Come home to-morrow without fail. Do not let mother know I sent for you."

Conjectures as to the meaning of this mysterious message kept his mind busy, and forebodings of illness or trouble mingled sadly enough with thoughts of the check his hopes had received the night before. The cottage at Highgate had been little in his mind during the past blissful month. He had written perfunctorily once or twice to his mother, and now blamed himself for not having taken more to heart the hints that Peggy's letters had contained of something wrong at home. He took them and those of his mother from his pocket. Mrs. Greenfield's were much the same as usual. She said very little about herself and nothing at all about Peggy, which now struck him as not a little odd. Peggy had written shortly. There was a total absence of the spring and light-heartedness which had always made her communications so entertaining. She mentioned once or twice that Mrs. Greenfield was not well. She also said little about herself, but the general tone of her letters was so depressed that George could hardly believe, on reading them one after the other, that their significance had affected him so little. But when he had exhausted his brain with conjectures as to what the new trouble could be towards which he was now hastening, he shrugged his shoulders and put it away from him until the end of his journey, leaning back in his corner and losing himself in his own thoughts, thoughts that had nothing to do with the cottage at Highgate, so selfish does the purest love make the best of us poor mortals.

When Peggy had said good-bye to Guy at the corner of the Hampstead lane, she walked back to the cottage as happy a girl as any to be found in England. All the clouds had rolled away, and she gave herself up to rose-coloured memories and anticipations. She went straight to the room where Mrs. Greenfield was sewing by the window, knelt down beside her, and nestled her dark little head against the other woman's shoulder.

"Something has happened to me, mother," she said in a voice tremulous with emotion.

Mrs. Greenfield put her arm round the girl. She divined her story, but her face was anxious and troubled, and, although she tried once or twice, she could utter no words.

"Tell me, dear," she whispered at last; and Peggy poured into her ear the wonderful tale of the morning's happenings. "And he is going straight up to Glasgow to-night to see father," she ended.

Mrs. Greenfield drew her and held her to her heart. "You must not hope too much, my darling," she said.

"Why, mother?" exclaimed Peggy in a voice full of pain and surprise. "Surely father cannot say 'No'? You don't think so; tell me you don't think so."

"I don't know, dear," said Mrs. Greenfield, hesitatingly. "But for your own sake, darling Peggy, do not hope for too much until you know."

Peggy rose and drew herself up. "I shall hear to-morrow morning," she said. "He promised to send me a telegram and to come straight to me. I know he will not give me up, whatever happens." Pride in her newly accepted lover prevented her asking what reasons her father could have for refusing him.

But, alas! no telegram came on the morrow, and as the day wore on the picture of a young man all love and eagerness knocking at the door faded into the shadow of a happiness that might have been. And the next day opened with hope, which sank again into bitter disappointment as no word came.

In the afternoon Peggy had to go out on some domestic errand. When she returned Mrs. Greenfield called her to her.

"I have had a letter, darling," she said. Her voice was pained, and there were tears in her eyes. Peggy knew then how much of hope there had been mixed with her

disappointment, for it flickered and went out and left her in darkness. Her face was white, and she felt faint and sick. Mrs. Greenfield made her sit beside her and drew her head on to her breast.

"Is it all over, mother?" she asked, trembling.

"Yes, my darling, it is all over. You must put away all thoughts of him from your heart."

Peggy was silent for a time, fighting her pain with all her might.

"Tell me," she said. "You have heard from—from father?"

"No," replied Mrs. Greenfield, and there was no further need to ask whose hand had written the letter which had killed the last blossom of hope.

"Your father has refused to let him see you or even write to you any more," said Mrs. Greenfield. "He was made to promise that he would not do so, or you would have been taken away from us at once to live in Glasgow."

"How cruel of father, how cruel!" cried Peggy, clenching her hand. The little outburst of passion did her good. She felt better able to bear what should follow. "But he can't have promised!" she cried again. "He told me he loved me. He can't have promised to give me up so easily."

"Think, darling," said Mrs. Greenfield quietly. "He did it to save you pain. Your father would have taken you away from us and kept you closely in his own house."

"He ought not to have promised," interrupted Peggy, her eyes flashing. "He ought to have trusted me. He might have known that I would undergo anything for his sake. Does father think," she went on, with growing excitement, "that I will render him obedience longer than I am obliged to? I hate him. Yes, I hate him. He has never been a father to me in anything but name. And now for no reason he tramples the happiness of my whole life under foot and cares nothing. I would have waited for years for him, and he has given me up at a word, without a struggle. Oh, my heart will break." She threw herself on Mrs. Greenfield's lap and burst into a flood of tears.

The older woman, her eyes heavy with sorrow, comforted her as well as she was able. But she could say very little, nothing that would give the poor child whose heart was

so sore any hope, and Peggy wept herself out with her burden unlightened.

At last she ceased and stood up. "I will put him out of my mind," she said. "I will not mention his name again. I do not even ask to see his letter. You may burn it or keep it. I have you left, mother darling, and now I will never be anything but your daughter."

She knelt down again at Mrs. Greenfield's side, and the tears flowed again, but there was no passion in them. Their shedding meant only the renewal of the covenant of love between mother and daughter.

No word came from Mr. Richards. Content with the promise he had extracted, he let matters take their course, and recked nothing of salt tears and heavy hearts.

Poor little Peggy suffered most bitterly. She felt herself forsaken and despised. All her pride in Guy's avowal of love for her was turned into resentment against him for forsaking her so easily, and her wound was so raw that she could not bear even the gentle touch of her adopted mother's sympathy. There was complete silence between them after the truth had been made plain. Both suffered together, the older woman as deeply as the girl. And yet, in spite of her dry-eyed misery and passionate bursts of resentment, Peggy knew in her heart of hearts that, if Guy were to appear before her, her joy would be so great that she would ask for no explanations, but only sob out her love and forgiveness in his arms. Her father had much to answer for the almost insupportable pain he had brought upon his child by the dark workings of his narrow schemes.

About a week after the downfall of her short-lived happiness Peggy was sitting late at night at her open window, going over in her mind once more the sickening round of conjecture and baulked longing. If she went to bed, poor child, she knew that she would only lie awake through the long hours of darkness, a prey to thoughts that would bring stifled cries of agony to her lips, until the dawn should bring her a few hours of fitful sleep, which would only make the awaking to another day more hateful. It was something to feel the cool night breeze stir her hair, and to face her pain with the fullest waking appreciation of its weight.

Suddenly her heart leaped to her mouth, and she sat frozen into stillness as she heard footsteps in the deep

silence of the night stealthily approaching, and a cautious hand fumbling at the latch of the garden gate. The night was dark, but the glimmer of a gas-lamp not far away showed her the figure of a man in the shade of the shrubs that overhung the entrance to the short garden path. A wild thrill of hope ran through her blood, only to change into a feeling of terror as the man crept stealthily up to the door of the cottage just below her, and tapped gently on the panel with his knuckles. She could not see his face under his slouched felt hat, but her lover would never come like that by day or night, and Peggy's fright was so real as to drive all thoughts of Guy for the time being from her mind. She controlled her terror so far as to rise from her seat and creep to her door with the idea of waking Mrs. Greenfield. And then another thought stopped her, and brought a still keener thrill of fright. That stealthy knock on the panel of the door was meant to be answered by someone in the house.

Peggy stood immovable. She heard the door of Mrs. Greenfield's room opened quietly, and saw through her own, which stood ajar, the gleam of a candle as someone went softly downstairs. She heard the front door unchained and opened slowly, heard low whispering, the door of the parlour opened and closed, and voices in endless colloquy, murmuring, murmuring, beneath her.

What should she do? Her mother was in trouble. That she had known for long. She was ill and anxious, and Peggy's own unhappiness had only been added to another unrevealed unhappiness which she had been bearing alone. Peggy's whole soul went out to her, and she felt a quick motion of penitence which brought the tears to her eyes at having added another burden to that sorely tried heart.

What could she do to help her? Should she go down and break in upon the strange man and the dearly loved woman, murmuring, murmuring in the room below her? Should she insist upon sharing the troubles of one who had shared hers as if they had been her own? She could not tell what to do. She might only work havoc and cause still further distress to one whom she desired to help, if she acted on her impulse to go down, throw open the parlour door, and tax this furtive evil man with bringing distress to a good and gentle woman. She resolutely

forced her mind to a decision and finally locked her door and sat down again at the open window, but in the shadow of the curtains, to await for the end of the colloquy.

After a long time, when the church clock had thrice chimed the quarters, she thought she heard from below the chink of glass or china, and some time after that the doors were opened softly again. She saw the ominous figure creep once more down the garden path, and heard Mrs. Greenfield's step upon the stair. She held her breath while the handle of her own door was turned slowly and ineffectually, and when silence reigned once more in the little house, threw herself on her bed, and, tired out with watching and wondering, slept till the sun was high in the sky.

Somehow, as she dressed next morning, Peggy's grief seemed to have lost a little of its poignancy. Her heart was heavy enough, but its heaviness was no longer entirely on her own account. She had to devise means by which she could help Mrs. Greenfield to bear her unnamed trouble, and in trying to do so she found the keen edge of her own sorrow blunted. In pursuance of her decision the night before, she said to herself that she would not let her mother know what she had seen and heard, but she would try and get her to confide in her. And in the strength of her tender affection she hoped that the older woman would find some help.

Peggy was shocked at Mrs. Greenfield's appearance when she went downstairs. The poor woman had spent a sleepless night. Her face was drawn and haggard, and there were dark rings under her eyes. She looked as if she were in mortal illness, and she sat at the breakfast-table, eating and drinking nothing, too worn and spent to hide her misery. Peggy forced her with loving solicitude to take food, and when she had eaten the morsel that sufficed for her and drunk a little tea, knelt down beside her, embracing her and looking up into her face.

"Mother, darling," she said, "you know what my trouble is, and you have shared it with me. Won't you tell me what yours is and let me share that?"

The poor woman broke down, and leaning her head over the girl, wept long and piteously. Peggy said nothing, but caressed her with murmurs of love. At last she sat up and dried her eyes.

"There is a trouble, dear," she said quietly, "and perhaps it will help me to bear it more bravely and to see my way to the end of it now that you have discovered that there is one. But I cannot tell you what it is."

"Has it anything to do with George?" asked Peggy, suddenly divining that it was not in Mrs. Greenfield's nature to feel such distress about anything that would touch herself alone.

"It might affect George," she replied. "But the chief thing to think of is to keep all knowledge of it from him. You must not ask me anything more, dear child. We both have our griefs to bear, but we need not talk about them to one another. It will help us to bear them better now we know that we are not alone in them." And that was all she would say.

In spite of the shadows hanging over the little cottage, life went more tranquilly after that. Peggy watched over Mrs. Greenfield unceasingly, surrounded her with loving care. And she had the consolation of feeling that her love was not in vain. There was no happiness for either of them, but many leaden-footed hours of hopeless misery. And yet in the tenderness of each towards the other there was solace, which helped them somehow through the long sad days. Every night Peggy sat by her window and watched until long after midnight, learning to face her own bitter disappointment while she waited to ward off, if she could, another blow from one whom she told herself she now loved better than any other on earth.

And yet when the events of that dreadful night repeated themselves, as they did in about a week's time, she was powerless, and could do nothing but sit and suffer in silence, while again the stealthy steps crept up to the door and the long low talking went on in the room below.

To Peggy's surprise and thankfulness, Mrs. Greenfield seemed to suffer less after this visit. There were even traces of relief on her worn and troubled face when Peggy, her heart wrung with anxiety, greeted her the next morning, and throughout that day and those following she made some poor attempts at her old cheerfulness, distressing enough to witness, but not altogether unsuccessful. The girl would, perhaps, have relaxed her vigilance but that with the ease which came in believing that her mother's anxieties were lessening the sense of her own trouble weighed

more heavily upon her; and still she sat, night after night, wrestling with her own longings, until she began to gain a measure of peace, and came to find comfort in her long vigils in the warm lime-scented air of the silent nights. She had almost ceased to dread the coming of the furtive footsteps, hoping that that trouble at any rate was past, as the nights went by one by one until it was nearly a fortnight since she had last heard them. And then again on a night when bitterness had been absent from her thoughts, and she had experienced only deep and tender regrets that were almost contentment, she was rudely awakened from her dreams, and this time there was no disguising from herself that she must act, if she wished to save her friend and more than mother from a trouble no longer supportable.

The man came creeping up to the door as before, with his hateful slouched hat over his face and the stealthy tread that betrayed him for what he was, a creature who played upon the fears of women to gain his base and selfish ends. But this time his signal was repeated thrice, each time more insistently, before it was answered. It was plain that this visit was unexpected, and that the poor harassed woman who was somehow at the mercy of her persecutor had yielded to a false sense of security and allowed herself to sleep. Not so securely, however, but that at the third knock, delivered so loudly that Peggy was in terror lest the little maid sleeping at the back of the house should be aroused by it, her door opened quickly, and once again she went downstairs to let him in.

The murmurs from below were now louder than they had been, and once or twice Peggy could almost distinguish words, but not quite. The interview also was much shorter, lasting barely ten minutes before the opening of doors and voices now distinctly heard told her that for to-night it was over.

"Then you know what I shall do," the man was saying in a low but rough and perfectly audible voice as the front door was opened and he stood for a few moments immediately beneath her. Peggy hardly recognised her mother's voice as she replied,

"You will never be so cruel, after all I have done for you."

"All you have done for me!" sneered the man. "What

have you done for me compared to what's been done for you all these years ? ”

“ I have done what I could—the very utmost,” said Mrs. Greenfield. “ And I will do more if you will but be patient and give me time. If you drive me further now you will kill me. I am ill, and cannot bear up any longer under this persecution. If it had not been for my children I could not have borne up so long.”

“ Your children ! ” echoed the man with an ugly oath, and would have said more but that Mrs. Greenfield cried out in a passion,

“ Yes, my children ! Vile and wicked as you are, if you separate me from them, I will pray that you may never repent of your sins, and that you may go down to your grave unforgiven.”

Her words or her tone, startling in one of such habitual self-repression, cowed the man.

“ I shan't say any more,” he grumbled sullenly. “ But you will do what I tell you, and I will come in two nights' time for your answer,” and with that he left her, making no attempt to soften his steps as he walked down the garden path and let the gate swing to behind him.

There was little sleep for Peggy that night. From the room divided by hers only by a thin wall came moans and muffled sobs, as of one in the last extremity of fear and distress. Many times her hand was on the door, and once she crept out into the passage and would have made her way to the side of the stricken woman but that a cessation of the sounds of grief held her, and she went back to her own room and knelt by her bedside, sobbing out her own grief over a sorrow she was powerless to assuage.

The next day Mrs. Greenfield was unable to leave her bed. She lay miserable and helpless, and poor little Peggy, on whom sorrow seemed to have settled like a dove on its nest, beat her brains to discover what was best to be done. Something must be done, and done soon, for what hope was there of a recovery when the morning hours were hurrying towards the threatened visit on the following night ? Her first impulse was, of course, to send for George, but she shrank from doing this because she had realised that her mother's sharpest agony had been at the thought of George knowing anything of what had happened.

Through the long day, while she tended the sick woman, she argued out the question in her mind.

This man had the power of separating Mrs. Greenfield from herself and George. But how? Mrs. Greenfield had called them both her children. But Peggy herself was her child only in love and gratitude, and was with her because her own father had desired it. How could the words of a strange man separate *her* from her adopted mother? And yet it was no mere threat on his part. It was her mother who had acknowledged his power to do so. Peggy weighed the few words she had heard, and weighed them again. Nothing became clear to her except that this must be a secret in Mrs. Greenfield's life, not a secret of wrong-doing—that she would never believe—but a secret to which this man held the key, and which, if it were known, would rob her life of all that it held dear. That the man had taken money to hold his tongue was also clear, and that his demands had now risen to such a pitch that it was no longer possible to meet them. But as the day wore on one other thing became clear to Peggy's brave little soul, and that was that nothing, absolutely nothing, that could be known or said or done would be strong enough to tear her away from her mother; and when that conviction had once grown and settled in her mind another grew to keep it company—that, without the shadow of a doubt, she might hold the same of George. Then she hesitated no longer, and in the evening, when Mrs. Greenfield had asked to be left alone for a time, she went out of the cottage and down the hill to an office where she was not known and sent the telegram to George which reached him early the next morning in the great house amongst the Cumberland hills.

CHAPTER XVII

"ALWAYS MY SON"

THE next morning Mrs. Greenfield rose at her usual time. She looked frightfully ill, and it was plain that only by a strong exercise of will was she able to summon her failing strength to bear her through the day. Peggy, now that she had acted in the way to which her deliberate judgment had guided her, felt that her responsibility for the issue of affairs was less, and with some sudden sinkings of heart, lest for some reason George should not respond to her summons in time, looked forward to the afternoon, when she hoped he would come to them and take matters into his strong hands. For it was evident that Mrs. Greenfield had reached the limit of her powers of endurance, and, whatever course her cowardly persecutor decided to take, was no longer capable, either of averting, or, if it was to be what she dreaded, of supporting it. Peggy did what she could to distract and console her, but in the poor woman's inability any longer to respond to the girl's caressing tenderness there was distressing evidence again that her trouble was weighing her down.

In the afternoon Mrs. Greenfield went up to her room. Peggy sent the little maid out on some household errand, and sat at her window waiting for George. She had looked out the earliest train by which he might be expected to travel. It was a very early one, but she thought that her message would have made him catch it if he possibly could, and if it was punctual he ought to reach the cottage at about five o'clock. Had she known that her telegram had arrived too late for delivery the night before she would not have been sitting there waiting. But even official life in the hamlet of Morthwaite so centred round the house of Merrilees that George had been awakened to receive her message before six o'clock that morning instead of the orthodox eight, and had just had time to drive over and catch the first possible train to London. And the train was punctual to the minute, so that shortly before five o'clock

Peggy's heart gave a leap of intense joy and thankfulness as she saw his hansom drive up to the gate. She ran quickly but quietly down to intercept him, so that she might tell him all that had happened before his mother should know of his arrival.

George looked anxious enough as he came up the garden path carrying his kit bag. Peggy put her finger to her lips, drew him silently into the dining-room, and shut the door before he spoke.

"What is it, Peggy?" he asked. "Is anything the matter with mother? Where is she?"

"She is upstairs—asleep, I hope. But I will tell her you are here in a few minutes, and she will come down."

Then Peggy told him the whole story, all she had seen and all she had heard, without telling him, poor child, why she had been sitting at her window so late when she made her first discovery. That grief had lain only in the background of her mind for the last two days, and had hardly made itself felt in the greater cause of anxiety.

George heard her in silence. His face grew hard, and a dangerous glitter showed itself in his eyes as she went on with her story.

When she had finished he startled her more than she had been startled in the whole course of the affair.

"You know who it is, I suppose?" he asked shortly.

"No," gasped Peggy. "Do you?"

"Yes," said George. "It is my father."

"George!" exclaimed Peggy in open-mouthed astonishment.

"You thought he was dead," said George. "So did I. Mother told me he was dead, and nothing more about him. She may have thought it was true. She did think so, if she said it. And now he has come to life again to disgrace us."

His face blazed with anger as he spoke. Peggy had never seen him so moved, and was frightened at his vehemence. If this creeping midnight bully was his father, and was now to be known as such to the world, all the sweetness that had lately come into his life would have to be put behind him for ever. And as he thought of his mother and what she was even now suffering and preparing to suffer his passion almost overpowered him, and it would have gone hard with Mrs. Greenfield's persecutor if he had been within reach of George's hands at that moment.

After a short struggle he mastered himself. He must decide on a plan quickly. His mother might be down at any moment, and when she had once seen him he might not be able to talk to Peggy again alone before it was time to act. They hurriedly discussed their course and decided, dangerous as the shock might be in Mrs. Greenfield's state of health, that the only thing to be done was to let her admit the man, and for George to go into the room where they were talking and insist on a full explanation.

“ Whatever happens,” he said, “ it is I who must deal with him now and not she. She is keeping this secret back to spare me pain, but I ought to know it for my own sake as well as hers, and I will know it. Now go and tell mother I am here, Peggy, and be careful through the evening not to let her see that there is anything between us.”

George was prepared to see his mother looking ill, but her death-like pallor and her strained, eager look, when she came hurrying down to greet him, were worse than anything he had imagined. He had to disguise his distress, however, and to give some reason for his unexpected appearance. Poor Mrs. Greenfield was evidently torn between her joy at seeing him and her terror lest his presence in the cottage might dispel the secrecy which she wished to keep about her coming ordeal. She even suggested that he should go back after dinner and sleep in his chambers, making some excuse about his room not being prepared for him. But George laughed her suggestion away.

“ Why, mother dear,” he said, “ you have never wanted to turn me out of the house before. And I really couldn't travel another mile—I am so dead tired. I shall go to bed at ten o'clock and sleep like a log.”

And, indeed, after a quiet evening, during which Mrs. Greenfield had been almost cheerful, as George told them all—or nearly all—about his stay at Merrilees, it seemed not unlikely that he would sleep through everything that might happen, for he had scarcely closed his eyes the night before, and had been travelling by road and rail since six o'clock that morning. But he recognised the danger and sat bolt upright in a chair in his bedroom, nodding uncomfortably, until the sounds of opening doors and quiet footsteps, which had become so familiar to poor little

Peggy, aroused him effectually, and drove all thoughts of sleep from his brain. He waited a minute or two until everything was still and then went out of his room and downstairs. Peggy was standing at her door as he passed, a dark figure in the shadows. George saw her, but they said no word to one another as he went down to confront the intruder.

He could hear the man's voice as he neared the bottom of the stairs. It was rough and peremptory, and a low cry from his mother hastened his footsteps. He threw open the door of the room and strode in.

The man had his hand on Mrs. Greenfield's shoulder. He seemed to be in the act of threatening violence. Her hands were clasped in entreaty and her thin grey hair framed a piteous face. Almost before his presence could have been realised George had him by the collar and was shaking him to and fro with all the strength which his powerful muscles and burning rage could supply. He might even have killed him in his fury, but that he was aware of his mother falling on to the floor without a cry beside him. He flung the man from him with all his force into a corner of the room. Utterly taken by surprise and half strangled, but not seriously hurt, the wretched creature lay huddled against the wall.

"You move hand or foot till I've done with you," George blazed at him, "and I'll knock your brains out."

He turned to his mother and raised her tenderly, calling out to Peggy, who was in the room as soon as he had called. Together they laid the poor woman on a sofa and took steps to revive her, while the frightened rascal on the floor in the corner blinked and stared at them.

Peggy, alert and capable, busying herself over the stricken form on the sofa, cast a glance at him. And the glance brought a faint thrill of relief. He was so absolutely unlike what it was possible to imagine George's father being, in all except age. In the degradation of his drink-sodden face, and the cowering attitude of his mean body, there was no hint that even in youth and health he had ever possessed any distinction, either of birth or appearance. The idea of such a creature having ever been connected by any tie with a refined woman such as Mrs. Greenfield was difficult to believe; that a man like George could have owed his being to him was inconceivable.

It was not long before Mrs. Greenfield revived, and as she came to herself she seemed to summon all her powers to beat down the physical weakness which might prevent her from influencing the disclosures that were now bound to come. She sat up on the sofa and put Peggy away from her.

“ Oh, George,” she whispered wearily. “ You don’t know what you have done.”

“ Go and rest now, mother,” said George. “ I will keep this man here, and to-morrow you shall tell me what you fear from him.”

“ No, no,” said his mother. “ He must go to-night. Peggy, you must go to bed. You must not stay here.”

But Peggy refused. “ I am a woman now, mother,” she said, “ and perhaps I can help you as even George can’t. I won’t leave you.”

“ Let her stay, mother,” said George. “ She is your daughter, and my sister in everything but name. What there is to know, let her know too. There shall be no more concealments between us three.”

“ Concealments ! ” said the poor woman. “ Don’t upbraid me with that, George. I have practised no concealments that I was not obliged to.”

“ No, mother dearest,” said George. “ But now you are obliged to conceal nothing. I must know what this man wants from you and what threats he is holding over you that I may know how to deal with him. And first of all I must know who he is.”

The man cowering on the floor had been slowly gathering himself together during this speech and now stood on his feet, swaying unsteadily, with his hand on the table and his evil eyes fixed on them. Mrs. Greenfield sat facing him on the sofa, with Peggy on one side of her and George on the other, his hand on her shoulder. She shuddered and hid her face in her hand as her tormentor at last stood before them. He looked, indeed, a vile creature, with unshaven face, dirty clothes, and a malignant cunning in his eyes which he turned, now upon George, now upon Mrs. Greenfield, as if he were revolving in his mind how he could make the one pay for the punishment received from the other. At last he spoke.

“ You had better tell him to let me go,” he said. “ You won’t like it if I tell him.”

"Yes, go!" groaned Mrs. Greenfield, and then turned to George with a beseeching gesture. "George, my son," she cried. "It is cruel of you to drag the secrets of my past from me. I implore you to let this man go without questioning him further. Believe me, oh, do believe me, that it is better that you should not hear now what he, alas, will tell you. In time—perhaps in a short time—you will know everything, and you will thank me for keeping it from you now, if you do as I beseech you to do." She rocked to and fro in her distress, and held up imploring hands to her son.

George was shaken. "I wouldn't willingly cause you pain, mother," he said. "And I wouldn't get from that creature what you could tell me yourself. But reasons have arisen quite lately why I must have an answer to certain questions. If you will give me your word to tell me everything I may ask you, without reserve, I will let him go. Will you give me that promise?"

The man reached for a chair and dropped heavily into it, leaning back with an absurd affectation of indifference. Mrs. Greenfield sat with her head bowed but without speaking.

"Will you give me that promise, mother?" asked George again.

"I cannot, I cannot," she wailed. "It is beyond my power. I am bound."

"I don't want to put pressure on you through this brute," said George. "But I must know certain things. It is my right. I must know what my birth is. Perhaps the secrets between you and this man have nothing to do with that, and if you can tell me that that is so, and you will answer my questions on that point, I will let him go—after I have dealt with him."

"Your birth," sneered the man. "A fine kid-gloved gentleman you are to talk about your birth! Shall I tell him, Jane?"

George started as if he had been shot, and his face grew pale. Perhaps he had begun to hope that the fears that gripped his heart were groundless. Perhaps the very sight of the degraded being whose throat still bore the marks of his knuckles had driven them out of his mind.

There was a short pause. Mrs. Greenfield made no reply, but still rocked herself to and fro, moaning. Then George

drew himself up and said sharply : “ I will ask nothing of him. I can’t bear that he should be in the same room any longer with you and Peggy. Get out, you ! ” He made a threatening step towards the man. “ And if you ever come near this house or my mother again, I will break every bone in your body, and then have you locked up. Get out of the room and out of the house, or I’ll do it now.”

There was a table between him and the man, who was careful to keep on the other side of it as he spoke.

“ I’m to get out, am I ? ” he said. “ And you’ll use violence and then have me locked up, will you ? ” His hoarse voice grew louder as he went on. “ And who’s got a better right to be here than I have, if I like ? Who’s got a better right to the money that’s spent here, and the money that’s been spent on putting you above your place than I have ? Who’s got a better right to stand by that woman there, as you’re standing now ? Me or you ? Who am I ? you ask, who am I ? I’ll tell you who I am, my fine fellow——”

But Mrs. Greenfield had risen from her seat, and, waving aside the support that Peggy would have given, stood upright, facing the coarse brute whose voice had risen almost to a shout. “ Stop ! ” she said in a firm voice, and something in her appearance awed the man into silence.

Then she turned to George and said quietly, “ He is my husband.”

George breathed a deep sigh. “ And my father,” he added in a low voice.

“ NO ! ”

The words were uttered by a man who had come into the room unseen, and now stood just inside the doorway. Mrs. Greenfield sank back on the sofa and buried her face in her hands. “ Thank God ! ” she murmured in a tone of infinite relief. The others turned to him with one accord, startled to the point of terror by this unexpected intrusion in the dead of the night, and then Peggy and George cried out in amazement, while the man who had just been speaking sank trembling into his chair, the beads of perspiration standing out on his white face.

It was Mr. Richards who had entered so opportunely, and now took the direction of the whole affair into his hands as was his wont.

Taking no notice at first of the others he went up to the man cowering in a chair and whispered into his ear. The man rose without a word, and catching up his hat would have slunk out of the room, but that George sprang forward to intercept him.

"Oh, no," he said, as he stood before the door. "Mr. Richards is very deep in our family secrets, and comes at a very opportune moment, but he cannot be allowed to settle things for ever for us, without any reference to me. It isn't every day that one finds a father whom one thought—and hoped—was dead. We must see more of each other. Sit down again."

He gave a loud laugh. Small wonder that the overwhelming events of the night, coming after a long and tiring day, were beginning to work in his overtaxed brain.

The man stood where he was, his head bent. Mrs. Greenfield sank back on the sofa and closed her eyes while Peggy chafed her limp hands. Mr. Richards bent his bushy brows on George. Then he turned to Peggy.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, not unkindly. "This is no place for you. Go up to bed."

"No, she shall stay," said George instantly. "She is more my mother's daughter than she is yours. What I know now, she knows. And whatever more there is to come, she shall know that too."

"Go upstairs, Peggy," said Mr. Richards again.

But Peggy defied him openly for the first time in her life.

"I won't go," she cried. "She wants me, and you shan't take me away from her. You have been cruel enough to me, and she has always been kind. I will obey her now, and not you," and she clung to the half-conscious woman by her side, who feebly put out her hand and drew her towards her.

Then it was that this mysterious man, deep in so many secrets, at the very moment of his successful defiance at the hands of a young girl, and that girl his own daughter, showed what stuff he was made of.

"George Greenfield," he said slowly, "you have distrusted me ever since you were a child. Some day you will know that in everything I have done I have acted only for your good. But you won't know it yet for some time, and nothing you can say or do will hasten that

time. All that you can do by thwarting me now is to bring trouble on that good woman. If you ask questions of that man, and he answers them—but he won't do that now I have spoken to him—he will deceive you, because he has deceived himself. He can tell you nothing, because he knows nothing. I am the only man that can tell you what you will know some day, because I am the only man in the world that knows it. One woman knows it, and that is your mother. But she is under an oath to reveal nothing, and you know her well enough to know that she will not break her oath—even for you. One more point and I've done, and you will stand aside and let that man pass. He won't come near this place again. You said just now that I had come at a timely moment. That was truer than you thought. Your mother spoke the truth when she said that man was her husband. And I come in to tell you what no one else, not even the man himself, could have told you. He is not your father.”

This long speech, every sentence spoken with the utmost earnestness, bore with it the conviction of truth. George said nothing in reply to it, but hesitatingly, unwillingly as it seemed, moved away from the door. It was the most effective reply he could have made to the other's words.

The man, who had stood all this time, cowed and silent, his eyes bent on the ground, crept out of the room and out of the house, and returned no more to trouble the peace of its occupants.

The rest of that night wore away in trouble and sorrow. Mrs. Greenfield, utterly broken by the load of anxiety she had borne night and day for months past, and the successive shocks that had befallen her during the last few hours, lay unconscious, and, as it seemed to the watchers round her bed, very near death. Nothing they could do roused her from her lethargy, and at last George, leaving Peggy and her father to watch, went out to bring a doctor.

The two sat in silence by the bed for half an hour, while the slow dawn crept into the room and quenched the light of the candles. What thoughts passed through the mind of the dark, gloomy man, as he sat with his head on his breast, who could tell? The girl, who had so much to reproach him with, and to ask him, scarcely gave him a thought. None of her great anxiety was for herself. Her own troubles had passed from her mind, and all she prayed for was that

the frail life ebbing by her side might be spared to them who cherished it as a thing to be loved and revered.

The doctor, when he came, looked very grave. He sent for the maid, who had been sleeping calmly through the disturbances of the night, and turned George and Mr. Richards out of the room. The latter, not wishing perhaps to sit alone with George and be subjected to his questions, announced his intention of resting until he should be called for, and retired to a bedroom, where he may have slept until the morning, for he was not disturbed.

George, finding the confinement of the house insupportable, went out and paced the garden path, a prey to a thousand fears and forebodings, while the man and the two women in the room upstairs fought through the hours of the growing day to save a human life.

Shortly after seven the doctor came down to him.

"I am going home now for an hour or two," he said. "I will come back after breakfast. She is asleep, and is not likely to wake just yet. If she does, they know what to do, and I shall be at my house if I am wanted."

"Is she very ill?" asked George.

"She is very ill," answered the doctor. He was an old friend of the little family. "Peggy has told me that she has had months of terrible anxiety, culminating in a great shock. I don't ask more. But if the anxiety continues or the shock recurs it will kill her."

"It is at an end," said George. He felt bitterly that he could answer for very little, but that, at any rate, relying on Mr. Richards's words, he might safely promise.

"Then I hope we shall save her," said the doctor, "but you must be prepared for the worst. She has gone through too much to allow us to count on her recovery."

The words, kindly spoken, but relentless in their import, brought a suffocating sense of impotency.

"You will do all that you can?" was all that George could find to say.

"You may be sure of that," said the doctor. "And I shall be back in two hours at the latest."

The day wore on in ever deepening anxiety. The sufferer dozed, or lay still with her eyes closed, taking nourishment when it was brought to her, but otherwise lost to what was going on around her. The lines of care which had marked her face now for many weeks past were

gone, and she lay quietly, drifting slowly out to the great sea of illimitable peace. It became plain as the hours went by that nothing could be done by those who loved her to keep her back, and with stricken hearts they watched by her side, drawn closer together, the young man and the girl, by common memories and a common sorrow.

Towards the evening there came a flicker of dying life. She opened her eyes and recognised her dear ones. However they might try to hide it, she saw the hopeless sorrow in their faces.

“ I know, dears, I know,” she said tenderly as they kissed her. “ I am going to leave you.” And she held them to her with weak arms, as they wept silently, keeping back the utmost of their grief lest they should disturb the serenity of her passing hour.

“ We have had a happy life together, darlings,” she said in her low, fading voice. “ No mother has ever had two such children as mine. You are both my children, are you not—Peggy as well as George ? ” She joined their hands together, and they bent over her, holding her in their embrace. “ You will be brother and sister always,” the dying voice went on, “ whatever troubles may come to you ; and the troubles will lighten by-and-by, and disappear, as mine has disappeared. Tell me, darlings, that I have made your lives happy ? ”

They assured her of that, with whatever tender words they could summon, and she lay quietly and peacefully for some time. Then she roused herself again with an effort, and the shadow of the old trouble passed across her face.

“ Is your father here ? ” she asked of Peggy, and when she had received her reply, said, “ I must see him for a few minutes alone.”

“ Oh, not now, mother,” implored George.

“ Yes, dear,” she insisted. “ It is for the sake of both of you. And it will not be for many minutes. Come to me, both of you, when he has gone.”

Mr. Richards came at once upon the summons. His hard face softened as he stood over the bed and looked down on the dying woman.

“ You have kept your trust well,” he said. “ I wish you had told me of the other trouble before. I could have saved you from that.”

“ You came directly I sent for you,” she said. “ It is too

late to talk of that. But tell me now it will not be for long."

"You know the time," he said. "I cannot shorten it."

"I shall not live to see it," she said. "But perhaps it is better as it is. I do not repine. But I must leave that. There is so little time. And I want to speak to you about the dear girl, mine almost as much as yours. You have brought great trouble upon her. I have always done your bidding. Now I ask you before I die to do mine. Give back her lover to her."

The man was silent. The expression of his face changed, as if a struggle were going on in his mind. There was the old changeless obstinacy in it, but there was an anxiety, a softening, even a tenderness in it too.

"Say you will do so, and let me die in peace," she pleaded. "There is so little time, and I want my dear children back again."

Still he was silent.

"For the sake of the past and those true lovers," she said.

There was an instant change in his face; the hard eyes grew moist, the stern lips trembled.

"Not at once; but later I will do it if he is worthy," he answered her.

"Then bid me good-bye, and send my children to me," she said.

He leaned over her and took her nerveless hand in his. "Good-bye," he said slowly. "You will reap your reward," and he left the room.

She lingered till the night had closed in, sinking into unconsciousness soon after Mr. Richards had left her, with short intervals during which she was fully aware of the presence of George and Peggy.

Towards nine o'clock, when she had lain for over half an hour quite still, she opened her eyes, and a smile came over her worn face. George bent over her, longing passionately for some last word of recognition, for he knew that the end was very near. She put out her arms in a last weak effort. "George, my son! Always my son!" she cried, and then her arms fell by her side, and her smile changed into the endless content of death.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT CLOSE QUARTERS

IN that sad confusion of mind which follows immediately after the death of one dearly loved, before those who mourn the dead have had time to adjust their thoughts to the future, George and Peggy went down from the room where Mrs. Greenfield was lying to the parlour. Mr. Richards sat by the window, waiting. He rose as they entered the room. Peggy was crying, but George's face showed only bewilderment at his loss. There was no need for words to explain that the end had come. Mr. Richards's hard face showed genuine sorrow. He made a movement as if to clasp George's hand, but drew back again, awkwardly. Then he looked at Peggy as if he would fain have done or said something to comfort her, but she seemed to divine his intention and clung to George, her tears flowing freely.

And so Mr. Richards left his consolatory words unsaid.

"I can't do any more for you," he said. "I shall go back north by the five o'clock train."

"Oh, very well," said George, and turned away from him. Mr. Richards hesitated.

"I don't want to trouble you with business now," he said. "I will write to you when I reach home."

"Very well," said George again, and Mr. Richards went out without any further speech. Perhaps, in his own way, he had shown more tact than might have been expected from him.

His tact, however, such as it was, seemed to fail him when he reached the stronghold of his own home, for the letter which came to George three days after Mrs. Greenfield's death contained no word of sympathy or sorrow, stated shortly that the claims of business would prevent his coming south again to attend the funeral, and closed with two announcements, the baldness of which amounted almost to insolence.

"With regard to business affairs," wrote Mr. Richards, "I may as well tell you at once, to save disappointment,

that Mrs. Greenfield's income dies with her, and beyond a few hundred pounds which she has saved and left to you, you will be no better off by her death. She made a will some years ago and appointed me as her executor. I will hand over your legacy as soon as the legal formalities have been completed. I have written to Peggy, telling her to come up here on Friday next. That will give her time to make all necessary arrangements."

It may be supposed that, even in the sad absorption of mind which held him during the days immediately following his mother's death, George was not likely to receive such a communication without deep resentment. But he put it out of his mind, and made no reply to it until after the funeral.

Peggy and he drew very close together during those days. They talked much of the dead woman and all she had been to them, but the events that had immediately preceded her death were never mentioned. The disclosures that had been made on that troubled night seemed to have been wiped out of their minds for the time being by their common sorrow, and even their own private anxieties failed to disturb the sincerity of their grief.

They were sitting in the little parlour of the cottage on the evening of the day on which they had laid their mother's body to rest. For the first time since her death they felt the completeness of the separation which it had made between the past and the future. The happy days and years which both of them had spent in that quiet little home were over, and there remained for one of them work, perhaps success, but no longer the warmth of domestic affection; for the other an unknown future, emptied of everything that had brightened her childhood and youth.

They had been talking, sadly enough, of the change that was imminent in their lives. George was sitting in an easy chair by the fire and Peggy on a stool at his side. Suddenly she put her hand on his knee and burst into tears. George caressed the dark little head, but said nothing. He was not far from tears himself.

"I do so dread going up there to live," she said.

George felt bitterly that there was no reply to make, no alternative to suggest, nothing he could do for her who was in all respects his sister, except in the one which would have given him the right to make a home for her.

"Never mind, little girl," said George. "It may not be

for long. Some fairy prince will come along and take you away for good. I don't think that such a treasure of a girl as my little Peggy can hope to preserve her independence for very long."

He spoke lightly, but Peggy's tears flowed the more freely.

"I shall never marry now, George," she said, after a time. "I haven't told you yet what happened before darling mother's death; but I should like to tell you now, before I go away from you altogether. You are the only person in the world that I can speak to about it, and I must have somebody who knows. Then I shan't mind it so much."

Then she told him all about the few hours of happiness she had known after Guy had told her of his love for her, of the downfall of her happiness, owing to her father's harsh decision, and of the extinction of her hope. The telling of her tale seemed to open afresh her heart's wound. "Why, oh, why does father treat me like this?" she cried at the end of her story. "We should have been so happy together. And he gives me nothing in exchange; no love, no tenderness even. His letter telling me to go to him next week was just a few lines. If I thought that he wanted me I should not mind so much. I would even try and forget his unkindness and be a good daughter to him and make his home happy. But he doesn't want me. He just tells me the train to travel by and says nothing at all about being pleased to have me with him. Oh, he is treating me cruelly."

George could hardly contain his anger; but he showed as little of it as possible for Peggy's sake.

"I think it is cruel," he said. "I can't think what objection he can have to Guy. But I am afraid none of us know much of the motives that move your father. At any rate, I don't think his opposition can possibly last long, dear Peggy. You may comfort yourself with that. Guy is a very eligible young man, and I'm sure there is nothing that can reasonably be urged against him. He will go to your father again, and you will see that everything will come right in the end."

"I don't think about that now," said Peggy, quietly. "He gave me up so easily when father refused him."

"He said that he had been forced into it; that he had only given the promise for your sake, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then you must believe that. And you mustn't give up hope. He loves you, and love has a way of overcoming difficulties—when they are not insuperable ones." Poor George thought of his own love affair, well-nigh hopeless as it now appeared, but he did not return Peggy's confidence by imparting it to her.

When she had left him for the night he sat down to consider the future. The grave had closed finally on the free and happy days of his youth, and its memories had now to be put aside for a time, the thread of the tangled skein of like taken up again, and, if it might be, unravelled.

By-and-by he took out of his pocket Mr. Richards's letter and read it over. He made a strong effort to curb the angry thoughts that rose to the surface of his mind. Then he went to the writing table and wrote his reply.

"I can't keep up the pretence of friendship with the fellow any longer," he said to himself, and began formally :

"DEAR SIR,—

"I find it impossible to believe that you can expect me to be contented with the statements in your letter, especially in view of the fact that they contradict other statements already made to me by you. I intend to bring Peggy up to Glasgow next Friday. I shall stay the night at a hotel and call upon you the next morning, when I shall expect a full explanation from you of everything concerning my mother's property, as well as of other matters upon which I now insist upon being enlightened.

"Yours truly,

"GEORGE GREENFIELD."

When he had written and sealed this letter George set himself to the sad task of going over his mother's papers, not without some hope of gaining a clue to the mysteries that lay round his own birth and had shadowed her passing hours.

Mrs. Greenfield had kept all her private papers in the drawers of a little Davenport writing table, of which George had the key. But if she had ever kept any that had to do with her early life she had destroyed them all before her death. The drawers were filled chiefly with little mementoes of George's own childhood, locks of hair, photographs, early attempts at writing and picture making. Every letter he had ever written to her had been kept, not one destroyed, and they formed the chief part of the

contents of the few drawers. There were similar mementoes of Peggy, and for the rest only account books, old cheques and counterfoils. There was not one scrap of paper that had to do with a date previous to the taking of the cottage at Highgate, and George closed the desk at last with a sigh of disappointment. Her absorbing love for him was made manifest by the contents of these private receptacles ; but the dead voice kept its secret as the living voice had done, and left him unsatisfied.

A week later the pretty cottage was dismantled, and Peggy and George had turned their backs on it to begin a new life which, whatever happiness might be in store for either of them, would always hold one secret place of regretful memory.

Mr. Richards had deigned no reply to George's letter, and when George said good-bye to Peggy at the Glasgow terminus, he entrusted her with a note to her father announcing the hour at which he would call on him the following morning. Mr. Richards chose to receive him at his private house, and George was shown into a poor little room, half parlour, half dining room, where his prospective adversary was sitting at the table with business papers and account books in front of him. It was never very difficult to avoid shaking hands with Mr. Richards, who displayed little inclination for the lesser amenities of life, and with a brief "good morning" George plunged into the middle of things.

"Perhaps you have prepared me a statement of what I wrote to you about," he said.

"I have prepared no statement," replied Mr. Richards. "But I can show you Mrs. Greenfield's will, and can tell you the exact sum which I shall have to hand over to you when it is proved, and the duty and so on is paid. It will be a few shillings over seven hundred and forty pounds."

"Let me see the will first," said George.

Mr. Richards handed it to him, and he read it over. It was very short, merely mentioning his own name as sole legatee, and that of Mr. Richards as executor.

"That is perfectly clear," said George, and the two of them discussed a few details as to the proving of the will in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone.

"And now, Mr. Richards," said George, "you will be good enough to explain to me what you have done with the bulk of my mother's property."

The words in themselves were an insult as addressed to an honest man and George's tone did not take off from their effect. "If that won't rouse you," it seemed to say, "nothing will."

But the challenge did not rouse Mr. Richards. The red of his dark face grew a little redder, but he looked his questioner full in the face, and if he felt insulted his manner repelled the insult no less effectively than if he had met it with indignant denial.

"I told you two years ago——" he began.

"Oh, you told me a pack of lies two years ago, about that and other matters," interrupted George impatiently. "I want the truth now, and I'm going to get it."

"You are not going the right way to get it," returned Mr. Richards, still speaking quiet and evenly. "You had better listen to what I've got to say."

"You don't deny having lied to me two years ago, I suppose?"

"I don't deny anything, or admit anything. I just tell you this, that there are certain things that I *will not* tell you yet, and nothing you can say or do will make me."

"And one of those things, I suppose, is what has become of a sum of money of which you have acted as trustee. My knowledge of the law tells me that there will not be the slightest difficulty in extracting that piece of information from you, Mr. Richards, whatever else you may choose to keep to yourself."

"There was no sum of money. Mrs. Greenfield's income died with her."

"The income must have come from a sum of money in the first instance. You don't tell me that there was an annuity. Was there an annuity bought for her?"

"No."

"Then where did her income come from? Good heavens, man, do you really think you can keep silence about a thing like that?"

"I know that I'm going to."

George looked at him in sheer amazement. The very audacity of the statement robbed it of its power to anger him further. He found himself groping in his mind as for the explanation of a puzzle. Richards kept silence, and suddenly a light seemed to break in on his mind, a disagreeable suspicion which sent the blood rushing to his temples.

"You swore to me," he said, "that the money did not come from you yourself."

"You accused me of telling you a pack of lies," was Richards's reply, spoken slowly, with eyes fixed full on him.

George rose from his seat. "Good God!" he cried.

"Is that the truth? Have we been dependent on *you* all these years for everything?" He leaned across the table.

"Tell me," he said, "You *shall* tell me. Was my mother—have I been—dependent on your bounty?"

"I'll tell you nothing," came the steady answer.

George seized hold of the will which lay between them on the table, tore it in half, and threw the pieces into the grate. "I won't take a penny of that money," he cried passionately, "and I'll work till I drop to repay what we have had from you."

A grim smile showed itself at the corners of Mr. Richards's mouth. "Supposing I had supplied the income," he said, "That would be a pretty way of showing gratitude, wouldn't it?"

"Gratitude!" echoed George fiercely. "But wait a minute," he went on, collecting his thoughts. "You swore to me that it was not so, and in that at least I believe you spoke the truth. I remember your manner. And—you fool!" he ended abruptly, with a scornful stare.

Mr. Richards looked disconcerted for the first time.

"My mother told me herself—I remember it now—that her money was her own and did not come from you. And you tried to make me believe—you can take the word coward as well as liar from me, Mr. Richards."

Mr. Richards brushed his words aside with a movement of his hand. "Let's have an end to this," he said. "No, the income did not come from me. And it's waste of time for you to make any further guesses. I shall neither deny them if they are false, nor admit them if they are true. I say again as I've said already, I'll tell you nothing."

"And you are prepared to go into a court of law with that story?"

"Yes, I am prepared even for that."

"Well, we shall see. But after all, the money is not what I want to know about. If that were all, and you would assure me—but we'll come back to that later. Now, once for all, what are the facts about my birth? You said

the other night that you were the only man alive that knew them. You've got to tell me what you know now. I'll have no more mystery about it."

Mr. Richards answered him at once. "I'll tell you everything I mean to tell you straight off," he said, "and that will save time, for I'll tell you nothing else. When we had that conversation two years ago, I told you Mrs. Greenfield's husband, the man you saw the other night, was dead. I thought he was. I didn't know he was alive till I got a letter from her telling me that he had found her out and was persecuting her. She didn't want you to know, naturally, and she thought I might be able to help her. She told me he was coming the next night to try and get a large sum of money out of her, and she asked me to send it to her. I went myself instead, and that's how it was I got there just in time to frighten him off. I had found out something that I could have got him sent to prison for, at the time I told you of, and I'd brought the proofs with me. If I'd had any difficulty in getting rid of him, I—however, he went, quick enough."

"Yes, that's all very interesting," interrupted George, "but it isn't what I want to hear about. You know that well enough. You told me that that wretched creature was my father the last time you——"

"No, I never told you that."

"Well, you gave me to understand it, then, perfectly plainly. You're very particular about exact words, now, and I dare say you saved yourself by some quibble from telling an actual lie then. But you deceived me all the same. You don't deny that, I suppose?"

"I've told you already I deny nothing and admit nothing. What I meant to keep from you then I mean to keep from you now, and if you'll get that into your head you'll save yourself a lot of trouble."

"Will you swear to me solemnly that that man wasn't my father?"

"Yes, I'll swear that by any oath you like to name. I shouldn't have told you so the last time you asked me. But I let it out the other night for Mrs. Greenfield's sake, and you're welcome now to any consolation it brings you."

"Thank you. Then my mother was married before she met this man?"

"That I shan't tell you."

"You blackguard! You're hinting——"

"No, I'm not. Your mother was one of the best women I've ever met, and I respect her memory as much as you do. I simply will not answer one single question that I don't choose to, and if you like to draw wrong conclusions from my not answering, you've got yourself to thank for it. I'll tell you this—I've told you before and it's all I'll tell you—that some day you'll know."

"How shall I know, and when?"

"You'll know from me. When, I shan't tell you."

George made a gesture, almost of despair.

"If you knew what it meant to me!" was on his lips, but he would not address even that plea for consideration to his adversary.

"You'd better leave it," continued the other. "You won't blame me for keeping it back when I do tell you. I don't care if you do or not. But you may take it from me that you won't."

"I'll take nothing from you," said George, now at the limit of his patience, "except the truth. And I'll tell you this—that if you don't tell me now what I ask you, I'll go straight out of this house and put the whole matter into the hands of a lawyer. You'll be made to tell the story of the money you have had in trust, at any rate, and I dare say we shall be able to get at the rest through that. I am going to know, so you'd better make up your mind whether you'll tell me of your own accord, or have it dragged out of you in a court of law."

"You can't frighten me in that way," answered Richards, still speaking in firm, even tones. "I'll tell nothing I don't want to, either to you or to anybody else."

"You say so now, but I don't think you quite know what you are in for, Mr. Richards. There's one thing quite certain, and that is that you'll give an account of your trust, or else go to prison."

"Then I'll go to prison, but you'll be very sorry you were the means of sending me there afterwards."

"Oh, I'm not going to be put off any longer with that sort of thing. Are you going to make a clean breast of it now?"

"You've had my answer."

"Very well then. I'll take the only course that's open to me."

George rose and took up his hat from the table. There was no hesitation in his actions. Mr. Richards watched him narrowly, perhaps for a sign of weakness, but he turned to leave the room with not so much as another look, and his face was set.

Mr. Richards opened his mouth as if to speak, but seemed to change his mind, and with a shrug of his shoulders turned to the papers on the table before him.

And George would have gone away with nothing further said had he not on the very threshold of the room met Peggy, who had just entered the house. She was in walking dress and carried some small parcels. Perhaps her father had sent her out so that his interview with George should be undisturbed. At any rate, the look of pleased surprise which sprang to her face showed that she had not expected to see him at that time.

"Oh, George," she said, holding out her hands, "I am glad."

Then she turned her eyes from him to her father, and back again, marked the tension on the face of each, and obeyed the impulse which came to her both to ignore and to endeavour to relax it.

"Father has given me a room upstairs for my own sitting-room, and I am to furnish it as I please," she said. "I am going to be ever so happy here, George."

The tears rose to her eyes as she made this little speech, so courageous, and yet so pathetic. She turned her head away, but went on talking bravely. "I am going to make father take me about," she said. "He isn't going to be allowed to spend so much time over his business now. He has half promised to take me to the Highlands next summer. You will do it, father, won't you?"

"If I'm here," replied Mr. Richards.

George said nothing, but his face was perplexed.

"Have you finished your business together? Will you come up and see my room, George?" said Peggy.

"I'll come now," George replied. "We have said all there is to say," and he went out before her.

George returned to London that afternoon. He owned himself beaten. He had not thought of Peggy when he had threatened her father with exposure. His hands were tied. He could do nothing further.

CHAPTER XIX

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

THE Honourable Robert Conder, M.P., in pursuit of that experience which should fit him by-and-by to uplift his voice to fuller purpose in the conclaves of the nation, shortly after the close of the session set out on a tour round the colonies and dependencies of the British Empire.

The whole freckled family of Conders, with the exception of his mother, journeyed down to the Docks to see him off, and swarmed over the great ship which was to bear him away from a happy and united home to the uttermost ends of the earth; for Bobby Conder had already "done" India, and did not propose to leave the vessel until he should set foot in one of the colonies of Australasia.

Lord Conder, as 'became a man of his standing, got himself introduced by a Director of the Line to one who in a few hours would be a far greater man than he in a rather more limited sphere, the captain of the ship. Freddy Conder found a friend in the person of the first officer, and he and Algy Conder retired into the privacy of that functionary's cabin and discussed the situation. Dicky Conder forced his friendship on an assistant sub-engineer, and disappeared from view until all but the passengers and crew had left the ship, and he had already been given up for lost; while the feminine contingent of the Conder family followed Bobby in a long string through the narrow and perplexing passages which led to the various saloons and countless cabins of the great sea-going hotel, and exclaimed delightedly at all they saw.

All of them cried unaffectedly, and the twins audibly, as they kissed him good-bye, and even the faces of the male members of the family showed less of their usual smiling roundness as they stood in a group on the quay, while Bobby, leaning over the side, waved an intermittent pocket handkerchief as he was carried farther and farther out of their sight.

Bobby Conder did not propose to be away for more than

six months at the outside, but it is a long way to the other side of the world, and the Conder family lived in such habitual amity and contentment with each other that they abhorred separation of any sort. During those six months he was never spoken of in the house as "Bobby," but always as "Dear Bobby," and every Sunday evening after dinner, until news came of his safe arrival, the Conder family with their numerous dependents and any guests that might be staying in the house, assembled together in the hall, and sang the "Hymn for Those at Sea," which Mary Conder accompanied on the organ to the best of her ability.

In due course Bobby Conder landed in Australia, presented his letters of introduction, and proceeded to look about him with an eye for information. He found the cities and their inhabitants so disconcertingly like those he had left behind him that he almost despaired of picking up matter for an address to his constituents, but took courage when he left the beaten tracks, and, as he really did know something about stock-breeding, found plenty to interest him in the up-country stations at which he was generously entertained during a month of the Australian spring.

One of these at which he stayed for some days to examine the processes of sheep-shearing and the packing of wool for the steamers and fast sailing clippers which were lying in Sydney Harbour ready to carry it to the markets of Europe, was in the fertile region of the Murrumbidgee. The owner was one of the richest squatters in New South Wales, and Bobby had been introduced to him after a dinner at Government House, when he had, of course, received a pressing invitation from Mr. Rawlings to come up to Nunderadgee as soon as he was able, and to consider himself at home there as long as he liked to stay.

The squatter was a fine specimen of the best type of native-born Australian. He was a man of rather more than fifty, very tall and broad, with a sun-tanned face, honest blue eyes, and a great yellow beard. He had been at an English public school and an English university, and was as well-travelled and well-educated a gentleman as any English landowner. He had married rather late in life, and Bobby found his fine house, built on the banks of the river in the immense solitude of the Bush, full of young children, the easiest in the world to make friends with, the

boys showing him everything there was to show about the busy life of the station with an immense pride, and the girls following him about like little dogs, loving him for his happy good nature, and exhibiting the utmost appreciation of his jokes and stories. Bobby wrote to his mother a full account of Nunderadgee and its inhabitants, in which he said that it was almost as good as being at home, the highest compliment within the power of a member of the Conder family to bestow.

And "Certainly the nicest Englishman we have ever had with us," was Mrs. Rawlings' criticism to her husband, as, seated in the deep-shaded verandah, she watched a cluster of sunny little heads grouped round that of the budding statesman, who was fascinating his small friends with a series of drawings representing the various incidents of a day with a pack of hounds.

Sitting out on that same verandah with his host, a few nights after his arrival, when all the children had long since gone to bed, and the glorious light of the Southern moon silvered the wide stretches of park-like country lying before them, Bobby Conder listened to a tale of the early romances of the settlers in this fertile country.

"My grandfather was a working stonemason in an English village," said this lord of many acres in his quiet, well-bred voice. "Then he became a prison warder, and was sent out to Van Diemen's Land with a ship-load of convicts. My enemies," he added with a short laugh, "will tell you that he was a convict himself, but that doesn't happen to be true. He was a thrifty man with a managing wife. I have pictures of both of them, bad enough, painted after they had begun to succeed. They saved money, and he took up land at a time when it could be got for the asking. They bought sheep, took up more land and bought more sheep, and he died a rich man. My father succeeded him. He was never out of the colony in his life. He built this house, or most of it. It was the first big country station, and was considered a marvel in those days, though there are plenty to beat it now, even with my additions. I am the sole descendant of the old Cumberland stonemason, and I reap the benefit of his thrift and foresight."

"Cumberland?" said Bobby Conder. "What part of Cumberland?"

"He came from a village called Morthwaite, in the Lake country. I made a pilgrimage the last time I went home, and saw the little white-washed cottage where he was born."

"Morthwaite!" exclaimed Bobby. "Why, that is where Merrilees is."

"What do you know of Merrilees?" asked Mr. Rawlings, turning his head towards him.

"All the world knows something about Merrilees now, I suppose," said Bobby with a smile. "I happen to know a little more than most people, because, although I've never been there, it belongs to a fellow I've known all my life, and an uncle of mine is living in it at the present moment."

"Why isn't your friend living in it?"

"Because he can't afford it. Didn't you get the story out here—about the last man shutting himself up there for five-and-twenty years and turning a great fortune into jewels, which a rascal of a servant walked off with directly the breath was out of his body?"

"The story of Sir Roderick Bertram. Yes, we heard all that: He was living there when I went over to Morthwaite. I must confess that I did a little trespassing and got a glimpse of the place from the shore of the lake. I was specially interested in it. But who is your friend to whom you say it belongs now?"

"He is Guy Bertram, the last man's heir—a cousin, I think. He came in for the place, and everything else he could find. But the fact is, he didn't find much, because, as you know, a thief had already been at work."

"Mr. Conder, I think you are the man," said the squatter solemnly, rising to his full height of six-foot-three.

"Good God!" exclaimed the astonished Bobby.

Mr. Rawlings gave a great deep-lunged laugh.

"Pardon me," he said, "I meant something rather different. I think I shall now be able to fulfil a very old trust. If you will excuse me for a minute I will go and get some papers out of my room."

He went into the house, leaving the astonished Bobby meditatively sipping from a long glass.

Mr. Rawlings returned in a few minutes, bringing with him a lamp which he placed on the table between them, although the light of the full moon was almost bright enough to have made artificial light unnecessary. He sat down and produced a folded paper, sealed with an old-

fashioned common seal, and another paper out of a large docketed envelope.

"My grandfather," he said, "was one of the workmen employed to rebuild the house of Merrilees for Sir Michael Bertram, and to construct those wonderful cascades of which you have heard, and which I have seen. I remember the old man well. He lived to a great age, and often talked to me of his early years, and especially of the building of that great house, which seemed to have excited his imagination, and was indeed very different from anything he could have seen during the last fifty years of his life. It excited my youthful imagination, too, and when I did see it from a distance, after many years, it was like looking at a fairy palace of which one had been told in childhood, but never thought of as having any real existence.

"Well, the old man always spoke of the house as having some mysterious secret, which, as far as I remember, had to be divulged to a few of the workmen employed there, of whom he was one. All of these were under oath not to reveal it. But the possession of the secret troubled my grandfather, who was a simple-minded old man and loved straightforward ways.

"At last, as I was leaving to go to school for the first time, he called me to him—it was in a room of the old log-built house which stood where this is now. He was very old then, and I remember he cried over me—poor, white-haired old fellow—and said that we should never see each other again. He was very fond of me as a boy, and very good to me, and the first news I got when I landed in England was that of his death. He gave me these papers, and said he trusted me not to lose them, or to show them to anybody. This," holding out the loose sheet, "contains practically what he told me by word of mouth, and I think the time has come for me to fulfil his wishes. It is, I suppose, nearly a hundred years since Merrilees was built; and I do not consider myself bound by the old man's oath of secrecy. Nor, I suppose, did he, after he should be dead. This is what he has written:—

"To my grandson, John Rawlings, of Nunderadgee, in the colony of New South Wales.

"I trust to your keeping the sealed paper marked "Merrilees" enclosed in this, which you are not to open.

If you hear of any trouble coming to the family of Bertram, or to any family, through something strange about the house of Merrilees, at Morthwaite in Cumberland, you shall hand the sealed paper unopened to the master of that house, or give it to a friend of his to be delivered to him. The paper must not be sent through the mail, but given by your hands. If you hear of nothing, you shall entrust the sealed paper to your son with these directions, and he shall entrust it to his son, and so on, from father to son. No one but the master of the house of Merrilees is to break the seal.

“ ‘ JOHN RAWLINGS.

“ ‘ June 29th, 18—. ’ ”

He handed the paper to Bobby, who looked with interest at the crabbed but neat writing of the old settler, long since laid in his grave.

“ I have had the paper by me ever since,” continued Mr. Rawlings, “ and must confess that I had forgotten all about it until I read of what happened at Merrilees last June. Then I made up my mind that, if matters were not cleared up by the time I go home next year, I would take the paper home with me and hand it over to Sir Roderick’s successor. I did not suppose, however, that what had happened could really have anything to do with my old grandfather’s secret, so I did not bother myself to look out for any friend of the family to whom I could entrust it, as I perhaps should have done. But now you have come along I can wash my hands of the whole affair, and you can give the paper to your friend for what it is worth. Only you mustn’t send it by mail. That, as you see, is a stipulation.”

“ Well, if this helps my friend Bertram to get back his fortune,” said Bobby, “ he will have something to thank you for.”

“ I don’t see how that can be,” said the squatter. “ That seems to me a clear case of successful theft. It might perhaps help him to—but we will make no conjectures. I should like to hear the result of your commission, though, if anything comes of it. And now I think we had better go to bed.”

If Bobby Conder had been returning home when he received that paper a good deal of further anxiety might have been saved to more than one of his friends. But he

was only at the beginning of his travels overseas, and the little sealed packet was carried in his despatch box, along with his own invaluable notes and comments on things in general, through New Zealand, Japan, the South Pacific Islands, and the Dominion of Canada, before in the following spring it fell into the hands of Guy Bertram.

When Guy Bertram returned to London after his interview with Peggy's father, he was at first as miserable and unhappy a young man as it would have been possible to find anywhere. His longing for Peggy was increased by the apparently insuperable obstacle that had been put in the way of his winning her. He was again inclined to curse his folly in binding himself by his own promise in a way that no commands or even threats directed against himself could have bound him. But on thinking the matter over, he came to the conclusion that Mr. Richards had held the winning cards in any case, and that the only grain of consolation in the whole unhappy affair was that he had saved Peggy by so binding himself from coercion, which, if it had been practised, he himself would have been responsible in bringing upon her, and which he could have done nothing to alleviate. After all, she was still under age, and her father had the right for some time yet, however arbitrarily he might exercise it, to refuse his consent to her marriage with anyone of whom he disapproved.

But at first Guy was inconsolable. None of the pursuits by the help of which he had hitherto lived a pleasant and contented life now afforded him the slightest solace. He allowed the building of his cottage to go on, because he was too much occupied with the bitterness of his lot to stop it; but all interest in his project had deserted him for the present, and the bare idea of going down to see a place where he had begun to hope that he and Peggy would live happily together was painful to him.

At first he thought of going right away from England for a long time. He would go somewhere and shoot big game, or he would go and explore. But he took no steps to put either of those ideas into practice. He had not the slightest genuine desire to shoot game either big or small, or indeed, anything else, except occasionally himself, and as for exploring, his geography was too weak to lend the least trace of reality to the project.

With regard to the recovery of his stolen fortune, he was sometimes surprised to find how little he hoped for it, or indeed how small a place it filled in his thoughts. The weeks had gone by and no trace of the missing jewels had come to light. Even the clue to Lady Bertram's burial place, which might or might not have led to something had been lost. Having nothing better to do, he had gone down to Calthorp's office a few days after his return from Glasgow, to make inquiries. Calthorp was away on a holiday, but his partner had told Guy that all attempts to follow the journey of Sir Roderick with the body of his wife had so far failed. The statement that he was on his way to his yacht had apparently no further foundation than rumour current at the time, and it could not be discovered that he had possessed a yacht at the time, or even that he had hired one.

"I never thought much of that quest, Sir Guy," said Mr. Griffin, Calthorp's senior partner, "and now it has ended in smoke. We must wait, I think, till the thieves attempt to put the jewels on the market, and even then I'm afraid—well, it's no good disguising the fact that big jewels can be cut up into small ones, and that whatever loss might be sustained by doing so in this instance would be made up for by the great value of the booty and the additional safety that would come from following that course."

This argument was incontrovertible, and Guy went away with whatever dreams he may have cherished of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice fading to the vanishing point.

"And if I did get them back," he said to himself disconsolately, as he made his way westward, "I don't believe it would make any difference. The man is such a beast."

When he had mooned aimlessly about the streets of London for a week, and the need of a definite object in life began to assert itself, the idea of working very seriously and steadily at his painting presented itself and grew upon him. He would forsake the idle, pleasant paths which had beguiled him of late years from his once formed purpose, and take the hard high road which would lead him to fame, fame which would after all be valueless to him since he had no one with whom to share it. But it was not the fame, he told himself, that he cared about now. It was the dis-

cipline of hard work, and perhaps a little of the comfort that would come from the fact that Peggy would hear of his career, and would remember that on that Sunday afternoon, which would bring bitter-sweet memories to both of them in after years, she had believed in a possible career for him, when he had ceased to believe in it himself. And when his thoughts had brought him to this point they brightened still further, for what objections could any father make against one who was by act of Providence a rich man and a baronet, and by his own a great artist?

The hard road might after all lead him to where Peggy was waiting for him, and at length, somewhat encouraged by his musings, Guy packed up all the paraphernalia of an embryo academician and betook himself to Norway. And as it was Norway he had hit upon for the exercise of his talents, he added to his impedimenta one or two trout rods and a sufficiency of tackle.

After a month's excellent fishing in the neighbourhood of Gudvangen—for he had chanced on some friends on his way across and been persuaded to join them in renting a piece of water—Guy returned to England, having somewhat worn down the edge of his disappointment. The time had arrived for the usual series of country-house visits, and, although he had intended to refuse all such invitations for the future and to devote himself to the earnest study of his art, he found it difficult to break away altogether from the old and sufficiently agreeable routine, and so made arrangements, for each one of which there was a special reason, which would keep him occupied pretty well until Christmas. There would be time to settle down to hard work after the festive season had gone by, when the New Year should revive the old desires.

He was in London for a few days about the beginning of October when he ran against George Greenfield, who, dressed in deep mourning, was striding along Pall Mall. George stopped and shook hands with him, with a very faint shadow of his usual friendly smile. Guy's disturbed, inquiring face, more than the half-formed question that hung on his lips, told him that he had not heard the news of Mrs. Greenfield's death.

"My mother," said George gravely. "She died a fortnight ago, after a very short illness."

Guy turned and walked with him, stammering out his astonishment and sympathy.

"And Miss Richards?" he asked presently, when George had told him in a few words what there was to tell.

"She has gone up to Glasgow to live with her father," said George shortly. "The poor little place up at Highgate is to be let. I was brought up in it. I shall never go there again."

"I wish you would come up to my rooms for a moment, George," said Guy, when they had reached the corner of St. James's Street. "I've got something to say to you."

George cast a quick glance at him.

"All right," he said, and they went up together.

George threw himself into an armchair by the window, while Guy paced the room with his eyes on the floor.

"I don't know whether Peggy has told you anything about me," he said, coming to a stop in front of his friend.

"She has," said George. "I don't know whether she would have done so if my mother had lived; but, as it is, poor child, I'm about the only friend she's got left. Unless you can count her father!" he added, with extraordinary bitterness.

"What does she think, what must she think of me for leaving her, without a word, as I did?" cried Guy, all the pain of those days, the memory of which he had been doing his best to drown, coming back to him with a rush.

"Well, she thinks that that most attractive gentleman, her father—damn him—found some way of influencing you to make you give her up. She also thinks, if I judge her rightly, that you ought not to have let him influence you in that way after what you had said to her. And I don't know that I don't agree with her."

He spoke rather roughly. His whole appearance had undergone a change since Guy had last seen him. His straightforward, decisive, but always frank and prepossessing manner had given place to something more aggressive, even overbearing. He looked much older. His strength of mind and body was still apparent, but its spring and grace had disappeared. He was not yet twenty-five, but his youth seemed to have dropped away from him already.

"Look here, George," said Guy, now on the defensive. "What was I to do? If I had refused to give him a

definite promise not to go near her again, or even to write and bid her good-bye, he swore he would take her away from your mother at once."

"Yes, and he would have done it too," said George.

"Very well, then. I should have been a nice sort of fellow if I had helped to make her miserable in that way, shouldn't I? And your mother too. And what good would it have done either of us?"

"What you did sounds generous, I know; and I've no doubt it was meant generously. But—I won't mince matters—it seems to me weak. And I think Peggy ought to have been consulted. She is absolutely loyal and brave. He wouldn't have had it all his own way by any means."

Guy had thrown himself into a chair. He found no reply to this indictment, but he looked extremely depressed.

"I'm hanged if I would have given up as easily as that a girl who had told me she loved me," George went on after a pause, "especially such a girl as Peggy, who would go through fire and water for any one to whom she had given her heart. However, I'm not going to quarrel with you about it. I've no doubt you love my little sister truly, and I wish you could marry her. What objection had that fellow to you?"

"He seemed to think that I was a worthless member of society, because I had never had to earn my living."

"That's nonsense," said George. "He has got some other reason. He couldn't give you a straight answer if he tried. He lies for the sake of it. I suppose there are no secrets in *your* life that he can have got hold of, and be working for his own ends?"

"There are no secrets in my life."

"Well, then, my advice to you is to hang on till Peggy is of age, and then to marry her with his leave or without it. She wants you, poor child, and when the time comes, I'll do all I can to help you."

Guy's face brightened wonderfully.

"You *are* a good chap, George," he said. "You have put life into me. And you will tell her, won't you, that it was for her sake I made that promise?"

"Well, I suppose she knows that. She is not likely to think it was for your own. However, I'll tell her. And now I must be going."

CHAPTER XX

LORD CARADOC TAKES ^{7th} ADVICE

LORD CARADOC did not take long to throw off the indisposition resulting from the unusual strain to which he had subjected himself during the past weeks. Intellectual work had been a constant stimulus and gratification to him ever since he had been able to read a page and hold a pen, and an occasional surfeit of it did him no harm. Indeed, when he had once recovered from his brain fatigue, he returned with renewed zest to the work he had had on hand before his great discovery.

He found, however, that he could not detach his mind from the inspiring, and to him most momentous events of the past month. He would rise from the table at which he sat to write in the great library and go into the smaller inner room, entering it with a feeling almost of religious awe. He would look at the table where the dead man had done such laborious and such brilliant work for so many long years. It was almost as sacred to him as an altar, and he would have shuddered at the idea of using it for the common purposes of everyday life. The books ranged round the room he regarded in the light of rough ore which the workings of a master mind had transformed into pure gold. The cabinet in which he had found the precious papers he would have bought at Christie's for thrice its value, and that would have been no mean one. He would turn over in his mind the daily delights and discoveries which he had experienced during those golden weeks, as a gourmet recalls the taste of fine wines. He associated George with this rare succession of intellectual pleasures, and found himself missing his companionship every hour of the day. A genuine respect for each other's talents had arisen and increased in the minds of the old and the young man, and community of interests, and—balancing the fruits of long experience and mellowed judgment on the one hand against a more practical outlook

on life on the other—equality of intellect, had aroused a feeling of something like affection between them.

It was not very long before the old scholar made up his mind that there was a great deal of profitable work that he and George might still do together, and on the second morning after his recovery he sat down at the table where he conducted that small proportion of his correspondence which he did not entirely neglect, to write him a pressing invitation to return to Merrilees forthwith.

He dated his paper and began, "My dear Mr. Greenfield." Then he paused and leaned back in his chair, and after a few minutes' consideration rose and walked to the nearest window, where he stood looking out with unseeing eyes over the stretch of water and woodland lying below him.

There were reasons why he could not ask his dear Mr. Greenfield to come to Merrilees just at present. They had escaped his memory until this moment, but none the less they existed, and existed on the plane of actual life, upon which Lord Caradoc trod as seldom as possible.

This young man to whom he had been about to write wished to marry his, Lord Caradoc's daughter. Young men did sometimes wish to marry the daughters of older men, he remembered. The fact added another complication to the many that beset the simplest possible scheme of existence, but still, there it was, and it must be accepted. In this instance such an arrangement would appear to have been the suggestion of a beneficent Providence, but if he could recall the conversation they had held together on the subject he felt sure he should remember that there had been some reason, or reasons, against it. He called up before the eyes of his mind the image of the suitor. Sound views, sound and for his age ripe judgment, a capacity for work as great as his own, enthusiasm for constructive criticism most creditable in one so young, with other attainments, likely to lead him far—what could there be against such a man? The image of George stood down, honourably acquitted of all blame.

Lord Caradoc turned his thoughts toward his daughter. He must have expected her to marry some time or other. What sort of suitor could he hope would come forward for her? A turn of memory brought back to him his own words, spoken on that night when his brain had been

singularly luminous, and he had exercised it just before its temporary breakdown on this very question.

"Of unblemished birth." That had been the stipulation he had made, which this young man, in other respects so much after his own heart, could only meet with an avowal of ignorance. Lord Caradoc shook his grizzled head. Certainly there could be no giving way on a point of such importance.

He mused a little longer. Perhaps the young man would bring him news that would set his mind at rest. He hoped—yes, now he definitely hoped—that it might be so. Then he went back to his writing table and tore up the letter he had begun to write.

Mrs. Herbert and Cicely were sitting on one of the lower terraces on this fine September morning, the older lady at work on something very plain and very useful for the benefit of one of the Morthwaite villagers, whom she had taken individually and collectively under her wing. Although small, the village of Morthwaite provided a fertile field for charitable enterprise. The vicar was a widower, devoted to the rearing and exhibition of poultry, and no lady in his own position of life had entered his house for twenty years. And the house of Merrilees for a longer period than that had held itself silently aloof. Cicely was sitting with a book in her lap, sometimes talking to her friend, sometimes dreaming.

"I wonder we have not heard from Mr. Greenfield," Mrs. Herbert was saying. "It is getting on for a week since he left us. I hope the telegram that called him home meant nothing serious."

She had said much the same thing two or three times a day since George had left. It was simply a formula for opening a conversation which might of itself lead to some topic of interest without the trouble of starting one.

"I expect he would have let us know if there had been anything serious," answered Cicely. She had said the same thing before, and said it again now with no particular mental effort.

"Lord Caradoc says that he never met so young a man with such a grasp of his subject," observed Mrs. Herbert.

The conversation, then, was to be about George, and not on the subject of alarming telegrams preparing the way for sad news.

"He is very nice," was the girl's reply.

So far, they had ploughed an old furrow. Mrs. Herbert now broke new ground.

"His history interests me," she said. "His father died, I think, before he was born, and he was brought up entirely by his mother. A fine woman, I feel sure, from what he has told me of her, and he seems to be devoted to her. They are, I should think, not at all well off, but Mr. Greenfield has made his own way entirely, and with his exceptional abilities, no doubt there is a fine career before him."

"He told me about his sister," said Cicely. "He is very fond of her, too."

"She is not his own sister," said Mrs. Herbert, "although they were brought up together. And she is some years younger."

"I saw her at the Oxford and Cambridge cricket match," said Cicely, "with Mr. Greenfield. Sir Guy Bertram spoke to them. I thought," she added slowly, "that she was very pretty."

"Sir Guy Bertram thinks so, I know," said Mrs. Herbert, with intention. "I gathered as much as that."

Cicely was silent. She had gathered as much, too, for Guy had told her of George, and of George's home and of his mother and sister, when it was first arranged that he should come to Merrilees. And he had said rather more of George's sister than her connection with George's scholarly acquirements warranted.

"Ah, here comes James with the letters," exclaimed Mrs. Herbert, rolling up her work. "Now perhaps we shall hear something of how the outside world is going on."

A boat was rounding the western cape. The man who rowed it made fast to the lowest stair, and came up the terraces towards them, carrying a postbag over his shoulder. He dealt out a few letters to Mrs. Herbert and a packet of illustrated papers to Cicely, and went on his way with the rest of his burden, mounting to the great white house above them.

"One from Mr. Greenfield at last," exclaimed Mrs. Herbert. "The rest are business letters, I can see."

She broke open the square envelope addressed to her in a firm scholarly hand, and glanced over its contents.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" she cried, in genuine distress.

"What! What is it?" asked Cicely.

"His mother died the day after he left us," said Mrs. Herbert. "Dear me! Poor fellow!" She cooed the expressive sympathy of a tender-hearted woman as she read the rest of George's letter. It told her in a manner almost formal that he had found his mother ill when he arrived, and that she had died on the evening of the following day. It apologised for his delay in thanking her for her kindness to him during a visit to which he would always look back with great pleasure, and asked her to explain his silence to Lord Caradoc, and to tell him that he would write to him very shortly. "With kind remembrances to Miss Caradoc," was his only allusion to Cicely, and Mrs. Herbert, whose eyes were habitually used to some purpose, could not help feeling a little surprised that, at a time when a craving for sympathy would be a venial weakness, he had sent no more intimate message to the girl whose companionship had certainly not been the least factor in the pleasure which he acknowledged himself to have gained from his stay at Merrilees. Cicely may have felt it but natural that a sudden overwhelming bereavement should have put her out of his mind, but she had enjoyed his society too much not to feel a deep sympathy with him in his loss and a desire to express it.

"Do you think I might write to him and say how sorry I am?" she asked.

"Yes, dear, do. I think you should," said Mrs. Herbert as she rose and collected her belongings. "And I will write, too. Dear, dear! That is a sad ending to his visit to us."

The two letters reached George in due course. He was grateful for both, and carried one of them with him wherever he went.

Lord Caradoc received the news with concern. He talked about it and about George during the progress of luncheon, and although he touched in the course of his conversation, on historical periods as usual, the idea presented itself to Mrs. Herbert's mind that she had never known him to take so human an interest in anyone before. Once or twice she noticed that he was looking at his daughter, as if the possibility of her forming a part in an actual scheme of life had suggested itself to him, and her woman's wit cleared obstacles and arrived at a definite impression that something, of which she knew nothing as yet, had taken place. She observed Lord Caradoc more

closely, and set up posts, as it were, in her conversation towards which he could direct his own. Before the end of the meal she had discovered more than he had any intention of revealing to anybody whatsoever. Then she, also, regarded Cicely from a new point of view, and wondered many things.

A few days later Lord Caradoc received George's letter. He had been on the way to his club to write it when he had been intercepted by Guy. It ran as follows :

“ DEAR LORD CARADOC,

“ Mrs. Herbert will have told you of the loss I have sustained, and you will not have expected to hear from me before. I should naturally have written to you immediately on my return to express my thanks to you for allowing me to participate in such an important work as that on which we have been engaged during the past month, and also for the very generous acknowledgment of my services which you have been good enough to make me. I do so now with the sincerest gratitude.

“ With reference to the petition I made to you on the last night of my stay in your house, I can only now withdraw it, and beg you, if you can, to forget that it was ever made. But I think that I owe it to you, as my very kind patron, to tell you, as far as I know myself, who I am.

“ I have been told that my father died before I was born. I was brought up entirely by the mother whom I have just lost, the best that a man ever had. But there was a secret in her life which shadowed its end. I should speak of it to no one else, and I ask you to believe me when I say, speaking not as her son, but as a man who has known a good woman all his life, that it was nothing of which she for her own sake need have been ashamed. I have been told that she was under a promise not to disclose it, and she died without doing so. I know that she must have made an unhappy marriage after the death of my father, and that is all I do know. My mother's affairs were managed for her by a man of the name of Robert Richards, who is in business in Glasgow. His daughter was brought up by my mother. He is in possession of the secret which she carried to her grave with her, and I have got this much from him, that the secret has to do with my birth. More than that I cannot extort by any means in my power—

and I have tried all—except that in time I shall know everything.

“Under these circumstances I feel that I have no right to urge you to allow me to try and win your daughter’s hand. I would not even make the attempt if I had your permission. I must do my work in the world without hoping for that happiness, and be thankful that the disadvantage which I have confessed to you will not hinder that work.

“I know you will allow me to sign myself, with the utmost respect and gratitude,

“Your sincere friend,

“GEORGE GREENFIELD.”

Lord Caradoc took off the gold-rimmed glasses which he had put on to read this letter, and wiped them reflectively. Then he put them on again, and read the letter through a second time. “Life presents problems that are not easy of solution,” he said to himself, after he had sat thinking for some considerable time. Then he locked the letter away in a drawer of his writing table.

But he could not lock away the remembrance of it, nor the particular problem which it presented to his mind. After an ineffectual attempt to concentrate himself on the work he had in hand he rose and paced the long library from end to end with the short steps of a student, his hands behind his bent figure, his eye-glasses perched on his high-bridged nose. George was a man after his own heart. That much had become quite clear to him. Even the acknowledgment of some mystery about his birth, or perhaps the way in which he had made it, increased his liking for him. Had he any right to withhold the dearest wish of his heart from a man so upright and honourable because of something which he could not help, and which affected his character in no way? Then he thought of his only daughter and of his ancient name, which there was no one but Cicely to bear after him; and although that name was seldom enough in his thoughts, he felt that his clear duty lay in preserving it spotless. And yet, in spite of that clear duty, his mind was not easy, and he continued to pace the floor. At last the idea came to him, not because he felt any doubt of his duty, but perhaps because he wanted it illumined for him, that he would disclose the

matter to a third person, and he rang the bell and asked that Mrs. Herbert might be informed that he would be glad if she would come and speak to him.

Mrs. Herbert came, knowing very well the question on which she was to be consulted, having indeed expected such a summons ever since she had set her sharp wits to work a few days before. As she came in in her tidy, sensible, morning dress, and sat down opposite to the man who had been her kind friend for so many years, her bright eyes bent critically upon him from behind her spectacles, she looked like a woman whom it might be well to consult on many a problem of life, great or small.

Lord Caradoc told her in short, hesitating sentences what had passed between him and George, and gave her the letter which he had received that morning.

"You think I am right, I hope, in the stipulation I made?" he asked, when she had handed it back to him.

"Quite right, absolutely right," she answered at once.

"I cannot think otherwise," said Lord Caradoc gravely.

"He says that the mystery is to be cleared."

"He does not say when. I gather that he does not know."

"It is difficult to think of him," said Mrs. Herbert thoughtfully, "as a man of anything but good birth. In fact, one might go farther than that, and say that if you were asked to pick out a man of undoubted gentle birth your choice would be very likely to fall on Mr. Greenfield."

"I do not think much about these things," said Lord Caradoc, "but I think I should agree with you."

"Sir Guy Bertram, for instance, who was here a short time ago," pursued Mrs. Herbert, "is, I suppose, of undoubtedly good birth, but I should say that Mr. Greenfield carried it more obviously than he did."

"The family of Bertram is nearly as old as—as any," observed Lord Caradoc.

"Have you ever noticed——" began Mrs. Herbert, and then paused.

"I beg your pardon," said Lord Caradoc. But she did not continue her remark.

"There will be Cicely to consider in any case," she said instead.

"There has been nothing, I think, between them," hazarded Lord Caradoc.

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Herbert, decisively. "But Cicely is very young, and rather impressionable. If I have judged Mr. Greenfield aright he would be very hard to resist where he had set his affections." She finished with a smile. It was obvious, at any rate, where her sympathies lay.

There was a long pause. "There is to be a limit to this mystery, whatever it may be," said Lord Caradoc at last. "Until I was satisfied on the point of birth I could not countenance the idea of any such—er—arrangement as has been—er—suggested. But Mr. Greenfield is a man whom I feel myself able to trust implicitly, and—er—if he were to come here again to help me in my work there is no reason that I can see, considering the terms of his letter, why the relations which have existed hitherto between him and us should be altered in any way."

He spoke slowly, appearing to give expression to his thoughts, as was his wont, as they gradually formed themselves in his mind. His speech showed a plentiful ignorance of the principles upon which he was bringing his mind to bear; but Mrs. Herbert, who might have been expected to display wider knowledge, did not contradict him.

"If he will come," she said, "I see no reason why he should not do so."

"I will write and ask him," said Lord Caradoc, with a sigh of relief.

Mrs. Herbert rose, but did not retire at once.

"What is the name of the man who, Mr. Greenfield says, is in possession of his secret?" she asked.

Lord Caradoc took up George's letter and told her, and then she left him to reply to it.

But George did not come again to Merrilees—at least, not just then. His work in London, somewhat neglected of late, detained him, and even if he had been free it is doubtful whether he could have brought himself to accept Lord Caradoc's invitation on the tacit understanding which had been conveyed to him.

CHAPTER XXI

CHRISTMAS AT HOLLINGBOURNE HALL

CHRISTMAS festivities were no mere pretence at Hollingbourne Hall, Lord Conder's seat in Hertfordshire. From their earliest childhood the four Conder boys and the six Conder girls had been accustomed to look forward to that season of the year as affording the highest form of enjoyment that could be extracted from life. Every established tradition connected in any degree with the observance of Christmas and the New Year was zealously kept up. The house was always crowded with relations, and as these were numerous, especially on Lord Conder's side of the family, and as, moreover, the sunny Conder views of life were as common amongst them as the possession of freckles, and hair varying from red to sandy, but seldom, if ever, inclining to black, they were usually a very merry party indeed. The making or buying of numerous presents was carried out with ostentatious secrecy by the younger members of the family, and the delightful evening on which they were offered with diffidence and accepted with cries of pleasure and surprise was anticipated by about two months.

The first appearance of the "waits" was regarded as an indication that the slow march of time was at last beginning to hasten to the wished-for end, and the little short-nosed Condors would lie and shiver with ecstasy in their little warm beds while the dismal moan of "The Mistletoe Bough" affronted the midnight air, wailed forth by a clarinet, a hautbois, a bassoon, and the usual incompetent trombone. By the time the church choir came round to sing carols in the hall, shepherded by the rector, who had but little voice, and the curate, who had none, there could no longer be any doubt that the period of revelry and licence had actually set in. For those of the little Condors whose age afforded the least excuse for the permission were allowed to sit up for the occasion—and the choir did not come until nearly ten o'clock—while those who had not yet

attained to that dignity were whipped out of bed, wrapped up in little flannel dressing-gowns and woollen shoes, and carried downstairs by a bevy of chattering maids to blink contentedly at the fascinating performance—and the rector singing tenor was not a sight to be missed—and as its conclusion were carried off again to fall blissfully asleep—if they were not asleep already—convinced that life for a little Conder who was good and not naughty brought times of almost insupportable pleasure. There was a supper in the servants' hall after the carol-singing, at which Lord Conder himself presided, and was more than usually beaming and friendly, so that the acknowledged yokels in the choir forgot their shyness, and the small tradespeople their superiority, and felt both alike that it was a great occasion.

After the carol-singing events crowded one upon the other almost too fast, and the march of time quickened into a gallop until it brought the great day. There was the pudding to be stirred under the friendly eye of the fat cook. There were the turkeys to be inspected in the larder, and the prize ox, or the most important part of what had been a prize ox, from the home farm, whose rosette was always pinned on to the unconscious breast of the youngest Conder of all. On another morning the gardeners would bring in great armfuls of holly and mistletoe from the woods, and evergreens from the shrubberies, and there would be festoons of greenery to be made, and the hall and the downstairs rooms and the nurseries to be decorated out of all semblance to their everyday appearance. A little later on the Christmas tree would appear and be stood up in all its sombre bareness at one end of the hall. But if anyone thought that the smallest of all the little Condors looked upon this tree as an ordinary fir out of the plantations he would be vastly mistaken. Well they knew that, however bare it might appear when it was brought in, it had the wonderful faculty of putting forth in a single night such a crop of pink and blue and yellow and white tapers, such apples of gold and silver and pearl, and such entrancing toys, while from about its roots would spring such a variety of brown paper parcels, fertile in surprises, that it never once occurred to them that it was a fir at all. It was the Christmas tree, even in its first state of deceptive barrenness.

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The arrival of the Christmas guests enlarged the bounds of liberty still further. The nurseries were filled to overflowing, and the nurses of the little Conders dispensed affability and hot buttered toast to the nurses of the little Conders' cousins. There were nightly romps in the hall and all over the house, for it was thoroughly understood at Hollingbourne Hall that Christmas was the children's festival, and even the smoking room was no safe retreat for an adult sportsman inclined for complete rest after a day in the coverts or with the hounds. Everybody had assembled by the time Christmas Eve came. In the evening there was snap-dragon, and the yule log was brought in, while later on the whole party sat round the great fireplace in the hall and told ghost stories, which it was tacitly understood should be brought to an extremely matter-of-fact ending out of deference to the nerves of those of the little Conders who were old enough to be present.

At last the great day dawned, and the house rang from an early hour with children's laughter and children's voices. Santa Claus had got in somehow during the night and shown his usual tactful discernment. In the morning the whole party trooped off to church through the park, and if there was not always snow underfoot, frost on the trees, a blue sky above, and ice that would bear on the lake, there always should have been, for the Conder family deserved all the benefits that Father Christmas had it in his power to bestow in return for the honour they showed him. There was not nearly room for all of them in the family pew, and bright Conder faces were scattered all over the church, and hearty Conder voices joined in the psalms and hymns from all quarters, so that the rector, who, if he did not know how to sing a Christmas carol, did know how to preach a Christmas sermon, was annually stirred up by his unusual congregation to surpass all his previous efforts. After church there were the farm and the stables to be visited, with beasts to be poked in the ribs and horses to be presented with sugar and carrots, and after that followed a go-as-you-please luncheon, at which everyone helped themselves, because the servants were having their Christmas dinner in their own quarters, and none must be absent. This was the time when an enterprising burglar could have ranged at will over the upper part of the house, but Father Christmas always protected Hollingbourne Hall during this

unguarded hour, or else all the enterprising burglars were enjoying similar festivities in the bosoms of their own families and had lost their eye for business. In the afternoon Lady Conder collected her brood, and with such of their guests as chose to accompany them went the round of the little village and carried gifts and kind words to her poorer neighbours, which she did with an air wholly human and far removed from all patronage.

Dinner was at six o'clock, for every little Conder, of whatever age or size, had to be present. It was such a dinner as might have been set before Lord Conder's remotest ancestors, if he had had any worth speaking of, but his grandfather had been a clerk in a bank. The turkey was carved by himself, and that part of the prize ox reserved for the purpose by his twin brother. The pudding was brought in blazing and set down in front of Lady Conder, and was followed immediately by dessert, which was accompanied by a running fire from the crackers and shrieks of laughter over the mottoes and the paper caps. Then the glass of each little Conder was filled with something sweet and sparkling, and Lord Conder, perhaps with a night-cap of tissue paper tied under his chin, perhaps with a military helmet of the same material, rose to make a speech and propose the toasts. Lord Conder, although not gifted with wit, was so extremely jovial and hearty, and so full of pleasure at being surrounded by all those whom he loved best in the world, and so little ashamed in the midst of that company of parting with every vestige of dignity, that the little Condors judged this performance to be the funniest they were ever privileged to witness. They rolled in their seats and clutched each other in a frenzy of delight when Lord Conder's voice rose to an impassioned shriek and sat quivering with open mouths ready for the next outburst when it sank into a mysterious whisper. Lord Conder's twin brother, who was a genuine humorist, and very popular with his nephews and nieces, always replied to the last toast of "All friends round St. Paul's," but his speech, although warmly received, never enjoyed the success that attended the efforts of the head of the family.

After dinner the whole party—men, women, and children—trooped out into the hall, and there was the Christmas tree, blazing with light and glory, from branches and roots of which every little Conder knew from past experience

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would come exactly what he or she desired most in all the world at that moment. And when the revels at last ended all the little Conders fell asleep in their several little beds, firmly convinced that they had enjoyed the very happiest day out of the three hundred and sixty-five.

The passage of years had robbed Christmas at Hollingbourne Hall of a few of the details which had characterised it when the Conder family were for the most part of a very tender age. But at the time of which we are writing four of the Conder girls and one of the boys were children still in age, and all the others children in heart, and among the numerous cousins who shared their pleasures with them at this season there was no lack of girls and boys, so that Christmas at Hollingbourne Hall was still a children's festival.

Here met, in the year in which the events we are describing took place, the usual collection of Conder relatives. Lord Caradoc, who, it will be remembered, in a moment of clear-sighted wisdom had married Lord Conder's sister, accompanied by Cicely and Mrs. Herbert, had been persuaded to take part in the ceremonies of the season. And Guy Bertram and George Greenfield, as friends of the family and bachelors without home ties, were also members of the party. Guy, although suffering under the stings of a rejected suit, managed to make himself tolerably cheerful, and was much appreciated as a companion by the boys and girls who thronged the house.

As for George, it was now three months since his mother's death. His work at the Bar, even in that short time, had increased, and his spare time was pretty fully occupied with political journalism and the part he was taking in the autumn political campaign. Consequently he could not have accepted Lord Caradoc's offers, more than once renewed, to help him in the work he was doing at Merrilees, even if he had been so minded. But the pressure and kindness of Lord Caradoc's letters had affected him, and the trustfulness shown in his integrity and good faith had given him confidence in himself, so that when Freddy Conder, of whom he had seen something while that breezy sailor was engaged with his books at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, invited him to spend Christmas at Hollingbourne Hall, and told him whom he might expect to meet there, George's resolution to see

nothing more of Cicely until his doubts about his parentage were set at rest, whenever that should be, had begun to weaken, and he eventually accepted the invitation. Having done so, he allowed pleasurable anticipations to colour his thoughts, and probably none of the many guests who drove up to the hospitable door of Hollingbourne Hall at intervals through that Christmas Eve, not even the holiday-making boys and girls, expected to derive such enjoyment from the visit as he did. Hard and successful work and the elastic spirits of youth—for he was not quite twenty-five—had had their due effect, and the tragedy of his mother's death and all the disappointments and sorrow that had accompanied it were lifting their shadows; and for these few days, at any rate, he had no intention of brooding upon what the past had brought to him, or what the future might bring. As he drove up to the house in the station omnibus, in company with a large party of chattering Conder relatives, whom he did not know, his thoughts did revert rather sadly to his little sister, who would spend a very dreary Christmas in her father's house in that grim northern city. He would willingly have put aside all his own pleasure, and even braved the now detested company of Mr. Richards, in order to be with her at a season which they had always spent together. But Mr. Richards had not invited him, and even for the sake of being with Peggy he could not bring himself to propose a visit to Mr. Richards's house unasked.

But here they were under the wide porch of Hollingbourne Hall, and a flood of light poured on to the snow from that hospitable door round which gathered a group of beaming faces to welcome the last of the arrivals.

"Now we are all here at last," said Lord Conder, as he wrung George's hand. "Howdy do, my dear Helen?"—this to his sister-in-law. "Howdy do? 'Pon my word, you look younger every time I see you. And the chicks! God bless 'em! Well, my dears"—Lord Conder was by this time muffled in embraces—"come to see your old uncle again, have you? That's right! That's right! Ah, John, my boy, they keep us going, don't they? How are you, old fellow?" And Lord Conder concluded his welcome with a confidential clasp of his brother's hand.

It was tea-time at Hollingbourne Hall, and under the thick festoons of evergreens the large party who had

already settled down to make themselves at home during their visit were scattered all over the hall. But, amongst so many that were as yet strange to him, George's eyes searched for and found the flower-like face of the girl whose image had been constantly with him ever since he had last seen her, although, at one time, he had made steadfast efforts to put it away from him. She was standing by one of the pillars of the great fireplace, and she came forward to greet him with manifest pleasure, with a soft flush on her cheeks. George's heart leaped within him but Cicely's blushes were of no more account than the coming and going of the cloud shadows on an April day, and she had blushed just as vividly on greeting Guy Bertram earlier in the afternoon. Guy himself came forward, as good-looking and apparently as light-hearted as ever. The Conder twins had annexed him, and now hung one on either arm.

"Well, George," he said as he disengaged a friendly hand, "how are you, old chap? Come and have a cigarette when you've drunk your fill. You won't have much time. We're allowed a quarter of an hour, and then we come back and play games with these infants."

"Infants, indeed!" exclaimed the twins in one voice, and Elsie added, "If you go into the smoking-room, we shall come too," which they did, and were turned out again with ignominy by Dicky. "Only men allowed here!" said Dicky, "and I'm keeping the door. Outside, please! We shall be with you in ten minutes, children."

George was content to forego the smoking of tobacco for the pleasure of receiving his tea at the hands of Cicely, and listening to the tones of her low, musical voice. There could be nothing between them but friendship, he had told himself, but the friendship was very sweet, and he might surely enjoy it during this brief respite from the cares of the world. Mrs. Herbert, seated on a sofa by the side of Lady Conder, who was calmly weighing the merits of knitted shawls as against flannel petticoats as Christmas presents for the village matrons, unshaken by the hubbub surrounding her, regarded the pair with kindly eyes from behind her spectacles, and, although she stood in the place of a mother to Cicely and had agreed with Lord Caradoc that no consent could under present circumstances be given to any proposal of closer ties, she made no attempt

to separate them nor exhibited any uneasiness at their prolonged *tête-à-tête*.

The tea-tables were presently removed, and the hall cleared for games. Dicky, whose zeal in the performance of his self-imposed duties outran his discretion, had actually succeeded in disinterring Lord Caradoc from a comfortable seat in the deserted library, under compulsion of taking part in a game of blind man's buff, unsoftened by the assurances of the eminent historian that his aptitude for that pursuit was small. He would not have been allowed to disturb his uncle, who, it was generally understood, was not amenable to the seasonable discipline of the house, had not Lord Conder unwillingly obeyed a summons to his business room just before, where he was engaged in dealing as mercifully as possible with a poacher. Lord Caradoc, however, ousted from his quiet retreat, came up to the fireplace, and when he saw George greeted him with such evident pleasure that Lady Conder, who had to reintroduce him to all the members of his wife's family every time they met, regarded him with an air in which surprise struggled with gratification for the mastery. He had probably forgotten all about George's plea for still closer relations with him, but his delight at finding such a companion amongst what we fear must be confessed was a somewhat uncongenial houseful of guests was so great, that he refused the offer of the undisturbed use of the library until dinner-time which Lord Conder made to him on his return, and stood in front of the fire, a complacent witness of the frolics of the greater part of the company, while he talked to George, who would, perhaps, have preferred to forego the claims of the muse of history at that particular time.

The laws of precedence were not observed at Hollingbourne Hall during the Christmas season. The names of all the ladies were written on pieces of paper and put into a hat, from which the men drew their partners for the procession into the dining-room. On the first evening of George's visit Lord Conder led the way with a demure maiden of the age of nine, and Lady Conder brought up the rear on the arm of Freddy, who took occasion to kiss her as they passed beneath a great bunch of mistletoe suspended in the hall, under the sympathetic eyes of several footmen. Mary Conder fell to the lot of George, who envied the good fortune of Dicky in drawing Cicely. Mary

Conder, however, seemed to have divined in some way how matters stood with him, for when Lord Conder had said "Thank God," which was his usual form of grace, and begun to devote himself to the entertainment of the small lady on his right, she said, "Doesn't Cicely look sweet to-night?" and before dinner was over she knew considerably more of George's feelings towards her cousin than he had any intention of divulging.

Nor was that all. If there was anything to be done to further the views or add to the enjoyment of their friends, you might safely trust a member of the Conder family to do it. When the men and the ladies parted for the night, Mary Conder went into Cicely's room with her, and as the two girls, the one so beautiful and the other so kind and true-hearted, sat over the fire together, Mary Conder began to sing the praises of George.

"Dear Bobby says he is one of the finest fellows he knows," she said, "and yet, you know, they do not agree in politics."

"I shouldn't think Bobby would mind that very much," observed Cicely with unconscious irony.

"I don't suppose he does," said Mary, "although there can't be many Radicals as nice and handsome as Mr. Greenfield. And, Cicely dear, I am sure he is awfully in love with you."

"Oh, Mary!" exclaimed Cicely, her face a deep red. "How can you say such a thing? I am sure it has never entered his mind. He would much rather talk to father than to me."

"You blind little bat," said Mary tenderly. "Can't you see?"

Cicely held her hands to her flaming cheeks. Perhaps she did see. Perhaps the memory of many little signs that she had scarcely understood rose before her, their significance suddenly clear. But she threw her hands from her.

"I don't want it," she said impatiently. "I don't believe it is true. I don't want any man to be in love with me. Why should anyone want any more than what we have here, with everybody so kind and so merry? If—if I thought anyone was in love with me it would spoil everything. I couldn't have any fun with Uncle Robert, or with Dicky or Freddy, but I should feel his eyes were

upon me and that he wanted me all to himself. I—I——”

“Why, Cicely darling!” exclaimed Mary in amaze, “what can have put all that into your head? You are only coming out next Tuesday, and you have hardly seen anybody yet.”

“No, but when you are alone a lot you think of things all the more,” said Cicely, speaking more quietly. “I know I should feel like that. Look at Mr. Douglas with Celia, how he follows her about with his eyes. I suppose they will be engaged soon; but she is not in the least like what she was last year. I noticed her to-night when Algy kissed her as we were coming upstairs. She didn’t like it a bit, although they are cousins, and he has always done it ever since she was tiny. She looked at Mr. Douglas. Fancy! Algy! I should hate to be like that and to feel that I belonged to someone and couldn’t be myself.”

“You would only feel like that if it wasn’t the right man,” said Mary reflectively. “Cicely dear, there is nobody else, is there?”

“No, no!” said Cicely vehemently.

“Hasn’t there ever been?” Mary persisted. “I thought——”

“I know what you mean,” said Cicely, her cheeks red again. “But indeed it isn’t so. I was rather silly a few months ago. But directly I began to think—and—and Mrs. Herbert said something to me—it all left off. And I don’t want it to begin again, Mary, now I am quite happy and—and rather ashamed of myself. There is such a lot of time. I am four years younger than you, you dear thing, and you are quite happy without all that. Why can’t I be happy too in the same way?”

“It is different with us,” said Mary, with a shade of melancholy in her voice. “We are none of us pretty, and father is very rich.”

“You darling!” said Cicely impulsively. “Men must be very silly if they can’t see how good and sweet you are. And as for being rich, I should think it’s easy enough to tell that sort of man, although I have never met any of them.”

“I have,” said Mary, “and it isn’t so very easy.”

“Well, don’t let us talk about it any more,” said Cicely. “Let us talk about the ball on Tuesday.”

CHAPTER XXII

MRS. HERBERT INTERVENES

WHEN George Greenfield rose on the morning of Christmas Day he looked out on a world of white. Father Christmas, who, at a certain period in the world's history, was told that he must come about a fortnight earlier than had been his wont, and has hardly recovered from his fit of the sulks ever since, for this year, at all events, had roused his energies and refused to put up with the rain and mild weather with which he had latterly been accompanied. He had seen to it that a hard frost should precede him by about a week, so that the ice on the lake at Hollingbourne Hall had already rung to the blades of the skaters. Not content with that he had ordered the snow, which had been falling in heavy flakes all through the night of Christmas Eve, and as George stood at his window he saw the wide stretch of park-land and the branches of the oaks with which it was studded and the lawns and shrubberies near the house one mass of gleaming white under the faint blue of a cloudless sky. He could see the roofs of the village and the square tower of the church beyond the trees, and the Christmas bells were already ringing to usher in the great day of the Christian year. George dressed quickly and hurried down to the church through the snow. Many of the large household were assembled there, with a good sprinkling of the villagers, and as he knelt down in a seat near Cicely and afterwards by her side at the altar he felt his love for her heightened and purified, and himself better able to wait in hope and patience for a time when everything should be well with him.

It did not take very long to get on terms of intimacy with any member of the house of Conder, and as the breakfast table gradually filled up with those kind and merry-hearted people, all talking and laughing and congratulating one another, George's heart grew light, and he experienced a glow of happiness such as he had seldom

felt in all his life. Lord Caradoc, it is true, appeared rather bewildered by all the noise and bustle, and the two young lovers, whose woeful plight had aroused Cicely's scorn the night before, looked as if a breakfast party of two would have been more to their liking. And Cicely herself was quieter than usual. But with these exceptions the whole party—and there were over thirty of them—were like one large family, all bound together by mutual affection and the genial influences of the season.

But we must linger no longer over the history of that Christmas Day, which ran its happy course in much the same way as the previous Christmas Days which we have already described at Hollingbourne Hall. Bobby, the only absent member of the family, was remembered and talked of as much as any absentee could have expected to be in the midst of so much merriment. He had reached Japan, from which far country a cablegram had been received, full of good wishes to his united and affectionate family.

The party remained together for nearly a week. The ice held over Christmas Day, and then disappeared in a burst of mild, but fine weather. Father Christmas had done his duty nobly, and relinquished his responsibilities to winter, who had not long succeeded in vanquishing autumn and now seemed to be prematurely attacked by his arch enemy spring. There was a meet of the hounds on the lawn in front of Hollingbourne Hall, and the boundless hospitality of the Conders was extended to a crowd of their neighbours, who thronged the hall and the dining room, and sallied forth accompanied by the greater part of the house-party, to find a fox in a distant spinney, and to kill him in the next county after a run which kept tongues busy for at least a week. On the following day there was a shoot. This was a time-honoured occasion at Hollingbourne Hall, for those of the boys who were old enough were allowed to take their places along the hedgerows and at the edges of the woods for the first time, and many of the men, who now killed their birds with practised hand and eye, remembered with pleasure their first glorious day, perhaps a quarter of a century ago, on which the number of cartridges expended had been out of all proportion to the head of game presently extended on the lawn in front of the house. Certainly to Dicky and a cousin of his own age, who had each been put in

possession of a new gun by one of the best makers, this day was more eagerly anticipated and enjoyed than any other. A wonderful number of birds constantly streamed over their heads wherever they might happen to be placed in the line of guns, and many an old cock pheasant who could little have expected it was permitted to go unharmed. But none of the older men seemed to mind, and when either of the boys did bring down his bird—or even that of his next neighbour—his feat was always applauded as it deserved.

On the night before the party broke up there was a ball. It was given in honour of Florence Conder and Cicely, both of whom were to be presented in the following spring. But before we come to that we have to record a few conversations between some of the characters with which our story chiefly concerns itself during that Christmas party at Hollingbourne Hall.

The first was between George and Guy, and was held about the same time as that already recorded between Cicely and Mary Conder. Most of the men were in the billiard-room, and there was space and opportunity in the smoking-room for a quiet conversation. Guy drew George towards a big sofa, apart from the little group round the fire.

“Have you anything to tell me?” he asked him. “I haven’t seen you for three months.”

“About Peggy, you mean?” said George. “Yes; she told me to tell you that she had never thought you had given her up of your own free will. And I think I may say on my own account that she has forgiven you for making that promise. Poor child! She apparently has made no promises, and hasn’t even been asked to make any. So I said I would give you her message when I saw you. And she sent you her love, and told me to say that she knew everything would come right in the end.”

Guy leant forward, unable to speak for a moment or two. “I’m going to Paris in about a week to work in the schools,” he said rather huskily. “I’m afraid I’ve wasted my time. I’m not worth much. But one can try and make one’s self worth something.”

“I’m very glad to hear that, Guy,” said George heartily. “I don’t know much about painting, but I believe you’ve got it in you to do something, and I think that every

fellow ought to make the most of what he *can* do. Besides, the delectable Richards will have his objections met if you take to work instead of play. I don't believe that objection is sincere. The fellow is so wrapped up in mysteries that he is bound to have a crooked reason behind the straight one he may have hit upon to confound you with. But if you paint a few pictures, and above all, if you manage to sell some of them, you'll take him on his own ground and beat him. And I can tell you that little Peggy is worth working for. She's got a heart of gold."

"I know that," said Guy. "I—I suppose she is up in Scotland still?"

"She is in Glasgow," said George, "living in a little six-roomed house with her father as her only companion. His circle of acquaintance is not a wide one, as you may imagine if you have seen him, and I should think my little sister is about as lonely and miserable as it is possible for anybody to be. I wish she was really my sister. One of the bitterest thoughts I have of that man is that he has the power to dispose of her life for the present, and I haven't, although I have been much closer to her for many years than he has."

Guy sat for some time in silence. Then he said with determination, "Before I go to Paris, I shall go up and see him again."

"It won't be any use," said George. "You don't know your Richards as I do."

"Hang it," said Guy. "He can't be entirely destitute of natural affection. If he can't make her happy himself, he must see, unless he's a fool or a brute, that it's his duty to let somebody else try, somebody who only asks to be allowed to spend his life in trying."

"He isn't a fool," said George. "But he *is* a brute, and he won't see it."

"I'll give him the chance," said Guy. "Things are intolerable as they are. I can't bear to think of her up there alone with him while we are enjoying ourselves here."

"I shouldn't be here if I could be with her," said George. "No more would you. I shall write and tell her everything. It will give her some pleasure. And it is all we can do for her at present. And I'll tell her that you are going up to see him. I don't see why I shouldn't. I don't suppose *he* will, and you won't go to his house. Yes, go.

You won't get anything out of him, but it will mean a good deal to her to know that you have gone. Well, young Richard ? ”

“ We are going to play pool,” said Dicky, who had burst into the room. “ And I have been sent to fetch everyone except Uncle Owen.”

No young man under the spell of a passion of which he has no reason to be ashamed, unless he is of an unusually reserved disposition, objects to making a confidante of a sympathetic woman much older than himself. There were three young men who were in love in the Christmas party at Hollingbourne Hall, and Mrs. Herbert, whose large heart warmed especially towards youth, managed to extract their stories from the lips of each of them. The story of young Douglas did not want much extracting. It lay patent to everyone under the roof of Hollingbourne Hall. But even he was pleased enough to confide the very exiguous obstacle that lay between him and happiness to a lady who evidently shared as far as was desirable under the circumstances his warm admiration for Miss Celia Conder. Young Douglas was very much in love with Celia, and she with him. There was, in fact, what was called an understanding between them, which as far as they were concerned left nothing to be desired in point of completeness. And young Douglas was the only son of a rich father. But herein lay the rub, that that rich father had brought young Douglas up to look forward to marriage with a lady other than Celia Conder, and had not yet been induced to adapt himself to the circumstances which had arisen to prevent that alliance, although he was reported to be coming round. Until he had completed the circle, however, a recognised engagement was out of the question, and young Douglas felt this to be very hard. He told the whole story to Mrs. Herbert of his own accord one morning when Celia was engaged elsewhere, and she said what was kind and encouraging, and sent him away half convinced that matters might have been still worse with him.

Guy, of course, having been continually in this good lady's company during his visit to Merrilees, was on terms of intimacy with her. He had already told her as much as he knew himself of the circumstances surrounding the death of Sir Roderick Bertram and the disappearance of his

fortune. Mrs. Herbert had shown a keen interest in the story, and it was natural that on meeting her again he should put her in possession of the new facts which had been the outcome of Calthorp's researches. Mrs. Herbert questioned and cross-questioned him and showed such a grasp of the details of what was known of the mystery that Guy told her that if Calthorp did not succeed in running the culprit Martin to earth within the next few weeks, he should take the matter out of his hands and put it into hers. The talk then turned on Guy's intentions, and it was not long before he found himself telling her in the fullest possible detail all about his meetings with Peggy and his interviews with Peggy's father.

Mrs. Herbert showed the keenest interest in this story too, but, somewhat to Guy's surprise, she did not show herself so struck with amazement at the absurdity of Mr. Richards's reasons for refusing him as might have been expected, nor so intolerant of them, for instance, as George had been.

"What *should* you do," she asked, much as Mr. Richards himself might have asked, "if you were obliged to work for a living?"

"My dear lady!" exclaimed Guy. "Surely *you* are not going to take that line? If the worst comes to the worst, and I never get my own back, I shall be quite well enough off. I shall never have to work for my living."

"But supposing you were to lose your money?" she persisted. "More unlikely things than that have happened. What should you do?"

Guy laughed. "You seem as determined to press the point as Richards was," he said. "Well, I should try and paint pictures for a living. Whether I should succeed in earning my bread and butter or not, I don't know. At any rate, I am going to try—not to earn my living, exactly, but to paint." And he told her of his plans.

"I think that is very wise of you," she said, when he had finished. "And I hope that in one way, if not in another, it will bring you what you want. She must be a dear girl. I am sure of that from what Mr. Greenfield has told me about her. I can't help feeling that everything will come right for you in the end, Sir Guy, and, you know, I think that if this disappointment and separation had not come one might perhaps have thought that you had won her too easily. Poor girl, it is sad that her life should be clouded

in this way now. But the future, if, as I hope and trust, you marry her in the end, will be all the brighter. And you will value her more."

"That's impossible," said Guy. "And, oh, how I do long for her!"

"Well; you must work and hope," said Mrs. Herbert. "Those are two things which make life worth living, and none of us can do without them."

"Yes, I will. It does one good to talk to you," said Guy. "And it's rather a nuisance to me to have to be secretive about anything. I should prefer that all the world knew what I was doing."

The next person to be drawn into the net of Mrs. Herbert's sympathies was George. That very busy young man found it impossible at this time of the year to allow himself six clear days away from his papers, and, by the time that the day on which the shoot had been fixed came round, work that had to be done had accumulated to such an extent that he had to beg for a whole morning entirely to himself. He even excused himself from lunching with the guns, and as Mrs. Herbert pleaded a cold and all the rest of the party, including, wonderful to relate, Lord Caradoc, set out soon after mid-day to walk or drive to the farmhouse where the luncheon was to be, Mrs. Herbert and George were left to eat that meal at home in company. When it was over Mrs. Herbert announced that she should enjoy the novel experience of making herself at home in a smoking room for half an hour, and they sat over the fire and talked, until the return of some of the ladies drove her in alarm from the room, and sent George back to his papers.

Mrs. Herbert, insatiable in her desire for detail, led George on to talk of himself and his mother and his sister, and when the name of Mr. Richards occurred in his recital of his early life in the little cottage she fixed on that and plied him with so many questions of dates and times and seasons, of appearance and manner, that at last George said, laughing at her:

"Why, you seem more interested in that portent than in all the rest of us put together."

"I will tell you why," said Mrs. Herbert, seriously. "I hope you will allow me to call myself your friend, although we have known each other only a short time. You know the very intimate position in which I stand to Lord Caradoc

and to Cicely, who is almost as much a daughter to me as your little Peggy was to your mother. I know—Lord Caradoc has told me, as you can see is natural under the circumstances—of your—your hopes with regard to her, and I shall not be breaking any confidences by telling you that if the secret of which this man holds the key proves to be no obstacle—I speak very plainly—Lord Caradoc would—how shall I say it?—Well, I think I may say that it would make him contented and happy.”

“You make me very happy when you say that,” said George in a low voice.

“You see,” continued Mrs. Herbert, in her placid, even way, “that I am not actuated by mere curiosity in asking you all these questions. You will not, of course, think that I am giving you more encouragement than I intend, by my words. As far as Cicely herself is concerned you would still have to win her if everything else were set right. It is only with the ‘everything else’ that we can concern ourselves. And that is why I am anxious to know all you can tell me about this man, or all that you feel inclined to tell me.”

“I will tell you everything that I can,” said George, and Mrs. Herbert was put in possession of a pretty vivid picture of Mr. Richards and all his comings and goings as seen through George’s eyes.

“There is another reason,” said Mrs. Herbert, “why I wish to know about this man. I am interested in his daughter, and Sir Guy Bertram has told me, what I had already guessed, how much his happiness is bound up in her. You do not mind, I hope, his making a confidante of a very discreet old woman like myself?”

“No, indeed,” said George. “Besides, you see how very slender the tie is that binds me to her,” he added rather bitterly. “She is in all respects my sister, except that I am quite unable to help her at all in her unhappiness. I could have nothing to say if Bertram chose to tell his story to everybody in this house. But, as I do look upon her as my sister in spite of that, I am very glad he has told you.”

“And if it were for you to decide you would be pleased that she should marry him?” asked Mrs. Herbert.

“Yes,” said George. “I should. I have always been fond of Bertram. He is idle, of course, but that’s about the worst you can say of him, and I don’t think his idleness

has done him as much harm as—as it would have done me, for instance. Besides,” he added, “he tells me he is going to be idle no longer. And if he really takes to working I think he will be about as good a chap as you could find in England. Yes, I think Peggy stands a very good chance of happiness with Guy Bertram.”

Mrs. Herbert was silent for a few minutes. Then she said, “I shall be going to Scotland for about a week or two at about the end of January to visit some of my relations. Would you like me to go and see your sister?”

“Oh, I wish you would,” said George. “It would be one of the kindest things you could do. She scarcely sees anyone but her father from one week’s end to another. It would give her real pleasure.”

“I will,” said Mrs. Herbert. “I wonder whether her father would let her come to us at Merrilees for a week or so. Lord Caradoc is so taken with the place that we are going up there again I think early in March. We should be very quiet, but she would not mind that.”

“I don’t know whether Richards would let her come,” said George. “I don’t know why he shouldn’t, but you can never tell what he will do. It would be something for her to look forward to.”

“I shall try and see that mysterious Mr. Richards when I go to Glasgow,” said Mrs. Herbert with a smile. “Perhaps I may be able to persuade him.”

“If you succeed,” said George, “your invitation will give as much pleasure as it is possible to imagine.”

The ball at Hollingbourne Hall, which took place on one of the last nights of the old year, brought the merry Christmas party to an end. It was a triumph for Cicely, who went through the night in a sort of maze of popularity and admiration. All the smart young men in their pink coats and high collars crowded round her suing for her favours, and if she had been so minded she could have divided each of her dances amongst a dozen different partners. There was no one who was prouder of the admiration she elicited than her fellow *débutante*, Florence Conder, whose modest charms were quite eclipsed by those of her cousin. On the next day the party broke up and went their several ways to face whatever of happiness or sorrow the new year might bring them.

CHAPTER XXIII

PEGGY AND HER FATHER

THE only thing to record before making a jump of two months and coming to the closing events of our story is Guy Bertram's second journey to Glasgow. He did not announce his visit to Mr. Richards, fearing that the only result of such an announcement would be a curt refusal to see him. He found himself again standing in the outer office, with the name of McDougall, Richards & Co. writ large on the ground glass of the door, while he waited with some trepidation the answer that might be brought to him from the inner room into which his card had just been taken. The answer, delivered by an elderly clerk with a broad roll of the tongue, was, "Will you be pleased to walk in, sir?" and Guy presented himself once more before Mr. Richards, who, somewhat to his surprise, rose to shake hands with him before signing him to a chair that stood facing his writing table.

Guy found himself at a loss for words, and Mr. Richards gave him no help as he sat before him, his heavy eyebrows bent on his unexpected visitor.

"I am leaving England immediately for some months," Guy began. "When I left Cambridge about five years ago I had some intention of becoming an artist. But the allowance which I received from my cousin gave me enough to live on and—well, I found life went rather pleasantly, and took no steps to prepare myself to study painting seriously. Now I am going to Paris to work in the schools and do what I can to make a success in the only career that seems to be open to me. I—I made up my mind to see you before leaving England, to ask whether this intention will make any difference in the answer you gave me three months ago."

Mr. Richards did not speak at once. He appeared to be thinking hard, as he sat with his eyes on the papers in front of him.

"What chance have you got of earning your living as an artist?" he asked at last.

A momentary spurt of impatience came over Guy. A living! He already had a good living, to say nothing of still existent possibilities. What did the man want?

"I haven't thought of it in that light," he said. "As I told you, I am quite well enough off not to be obliged to work for my living. I shall try to fit myself for this profession—or whatever you like to call it, because it gives me an object in life, and I think your idea is that every man ought to have some work to do in the world."

"Yes. That's very good as far as it goes," said Mr. Richards. "Still, I repeat my question, and if you want to continue the discussion you had better give me as definite an answer as you can."

"What do you call a living?" asked Guy with a slight tone of contempt in his voice.

"Let's say five a hundred a year," said Mr. Richards.

Guy thought for a moment. "It is so difficult to say," he said. "There are ways, I should think, in which one might be able to earn such an income as that—if it were necessary. But one would have to change one's aims, and to a certain extent lower them. I should like to go for the big things, and if I failed I should probably fail altogether. If my aim were to make a certain amount of money every year I should have to devote myself to lesser things. I should work as hard in either case, but in the one there would be something inspiring and not in the other."

"Well, I can understand that," said Mr. Richards. "I'm not a fool and I'm not as unreasonable as you think I am. I suppose for the next few months, whether you want to make money or not, you would be going through the same course of study."

"Yes," said Guy.

"Very well, then," said Mr. Richards. "We'll leave it there for the present. Your intention does make some difference. I wouldn't have my daughter marry an idler. I'll let the question stand over, and you can come and talk to me again when you are ready to start work on your own account. In the meantime things remain as they are, and I keep you to your promise."

"Will you tell your daughter what you have said to me?" asked Guy.

Mr. Richards frowned and looked down. There was an unwonted hesitation in his manner.

"Yes," he said presently, "I will tell her"; and then he stood up and held out his hand. "Good-bye," he said. "Stick to it and work hard. You'll be the better man for it, and I've nothing against you, whatever you may think, except that you've never done anything."

After Guy had left him Mr. Richards sat before his table for a long time doing nothing himself, although it was a busy time with his firm. He went home about seven o'clock and let himself into the narrow hall of his house. Peggy came to the door of the downstairs sitting-room to welcome him. She looked thin and pale and older than her years, but there was a steadfast look in her eyes which told of sorrows bravely faced, and a burden bravely borne. There was no antagonism in her manner as she put her hands on her father's shoulder and kissed him, and his bearing towards her had something of tenderness and protection, which might have given George Greenfield food for thought if he had witnessed the greeting between father and daughter.

After their evening meal they sat together in the little parlour, Peggy with her work-basket on the table by her side, and her father in an armchair glowering into the fire. Peggy was very silent in these days. Her vivacity seemed to have forsaken her, and indeed there was no one on whom she could very well have exercised it without arousing surprise and perhaps resentment.

Presently Mr. Richards raised his head and looked at her long and earnestly. He had often done so since the time they had first lived together, and although Peggy felt his eyes upon her she made no sign and kept hers bent upon her needlework. If she had met her father's gaze she might have seen something unusual in it to-night, a softness that sat strangely on that hard face, even the hint of a yearning, the desire of a lonely man for an affection and a response which he had done nothing to call forth.

After a time he spoke to her. His tone was harsh, but his face was not.

"Do you want to leave me?" he asked her.

Peggy raised her head and met his look. Something in his eyes made her bend hers again on her work.

"I do not want to leave you as long as I feel that you like to have me here," she said quietly.

"I do like to have you here," said her father. "You are a good girl and a good daughter. I haven't said much. It isn't my way. But—well, you've shown me what it is to have a home. And that is what I have never known."

Peggy was silent. She had done what she could and done it courageously and dutifully. But the word "home" meant something very real to her if it had been nothing to her father, and it had meant something very different to the gloomy little house in which she now spent most of her days alone.

"I know the way I have treated you must seem hard and unreasonable," continued Mr. Richards. "I can't help it, and I can't tell you my reasons for it. Some day perhaps you will understand why I couldn't give my consent at the time to your marrying that young man who came and asked me for you."

It was the first time Mr. Richards had ever alluded to Guy in Peggy's hearing since his peremptory dismissal of his suit. It was too much for her. She kept her head bent over her work, but her hands trembled and she could see nothing of what she was doing.

"I have seen him again," said Mr. Richards. "He is going to become a great painter, it seems. I don't know whether he has it in him to be something great. I should think not. At any rate he is going to try, and that shows he's got some of the right stuff in him. I have told him he may come and see me again in a few months' time. Don't hope too much. I don't know that I shall be able to give my consent to your marrying him after all. But if I can I will. I want to make you happy. I have done as much as I could for you up till now, though you may not think it. And I'm doing now what I've never done in my life before. I'm changing my plans. You can hope a little, but don't hope too much."

The pretence of work could be carried on no longer. Peggy put her hands on the table and bent her dark head over them, crying over the gleam of happiness that was breaking on her as she had so often cried of late over the dark clouds which seemed to be enveloping her whole life.

"Come here, my girl," said Mr. Richards. She rose and knelt by his side. He drew her to him, and she rested her head on her father's breast for the first time in her life.

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS. HERBERT VISITS GLASGOW

THE month of March, following a mild February, came in like the proverbial lamb. The daffodils were already preparing to unfold their yellow trumpets in the sheltered woodland hollows round the house of Merrilees, and the primroses had as yet no reason to regret an unusually early appearance. In the early days of the month Lord Caradoc moved his household from Berkeley Square and settled down once more to the enjoyment of his books and his flowers in the beautiful place to which his thoughts had persistently turned during the two months he had spent in London.

Lord Caradoc had not been well in London. His short illness of the previous autumn had left a weakness from which he had never entirely recovered. But he had had the enjoyment of seeing the great book which he and George Greenfield had prepared for the press through the final stages of proof-correction, and now lived in the glamour of the chorus of wonder and admiration which the publication of so monumental a work had evoked from the learned, the political, and the general reading world. The publication of Sir Roderick Bertram's great history naturally aroused anew the interest in his life and the mysterious occurrences which had followed his death, and when it seemed likely that a recrudescence of excitement on those very trivial affairs would for the moment obscure the fame of the book he had spent the best part of his life in compiling, Lord Caradoc left the newspapers to write and the clubs and drawing-rooms to talk, and retired to the rain-washed spaciousness of the Cumberland hills.

The day on which Lord Caradoc with Cicely and Mrs. Herbert journeyed north was cold and wet. On the following day the sunshine and mildness of the premature spring had returned, but Lord Caradoc was laid up with a bad chill and was unable to enjoy the delights of the open

air, to which he had been looking forward during his late sojourn amongst the bricks and mortar of London. He was not a very old man, but neither was he a very strong one. He had led a confined and studious life, and the strain to which he had often put his intellect and his powers of work was beginning to tell on him. He lay in his pleasant southward-facing room while the sun and the mild moist air streamed in through the open window, inviting him to a share in those opening wonders of nature which he loved only a little less than his books and his studies, and he was disturbed and restless because he could not respond to the invitation.

Mrs. Herbert, calm, adroit and resourceful, made a sick nurse to whom any invalid might be proud to attribute a recovery. But even she was unable to allay his irritation. Lord Caradoc fussed and Lord Caradoc grumbled, but he did not throw off his indisposition, and at the end of the third day he was still confined to his room. By that time, however, he had formulated a definite desire. He wanted the companionship of George Greenfield, and Mrs. Herbert wrote off an urgent summons to that very busy young man to come up to Merrilees at once, even if he could only spare a few days. Lord Caradoc was really ill, she said, although in his present surroundings there was nothing to prevent him from making a quick and complete recovery if his mind could be kept at ease. George's companionship had become necessary to him, and at present it seemed to be the only thing that he ardently desired. George replied that he would come two days later, and stay for some time. The morning after his letter reached Merrilees Lord Caradoc came down to the library, and on the following day he was busying himself in his Alpine garden.

During the last two months George had been constantly at the house in Berkeley Square. His co-operation had been necessary in seeing the History through the press, but Lord Caradoc had come to rely on him more and more and never seemed completely content, or as near content as he could be in London, unless George was with him or near him. Enough has been said of his character to show that he was entirely incapable of maintaining a continuous hold on the ordinary affairs of daily life, and it never seemed to occur to him that it was in any way unusual that he should eagerly welcome to his house and to the companionship of

his little circle a man who had asked his permission to pay his addresses to his daughter, a permission which he had refused. That little matter had probably passed out of his mind. But it had not passed out of George's, nor out of Mrs. Herbert's. That usually astute woman showed a surprising lack of judgment if she thought, as she appeared to think, that it was possible for a young man to occupy a position almost as intimate as that of a near relation in the house and to move neither backwards nor forwards in his attitude towards a girl with whom he had acknowledged himself ardently in love. George was young enough and had sufficient confidence in himself to believe that he could come and go as Lord Caradoc's trusted friend and maintain the attitude which he had marked out for himself with regard to Cicely without budging an inch. Of course he did nothing of the sort. Of course he fell more and more deeply in love with her every day, and of course he made love to her in a way that was all the more dangerous because he had no sort of idea that he was making love at all, and exercised a degree of self-control in her presence that caused him the most exquisite discomfort. Mrs. Herbert saw this going on under her eyes for two whole months without making the slightest attempt to stop it. It really seemed as if she were more culpable in the matter than Lord Caradoc himself.

Now that Lord Caradoc was apparently in a fair way to complete recovery from his indisposition, and, in the pleasure of George Greenfield's companionship, might safely be expected to do without her fostering care for a week or two, Mrs. Herbert put into execution her project of paying a visit to her relations in Scotland. She journeyed to Glasgow, and before going farther north slept a night in that city in order that she might call on Peggy, and, if possible, interview the redoubtable Mr. Richards on the following day. George Greenfield had arrived at Merrilees on the day before her departure, and she had the satisfaction of feeling as she travelled north that she had left everything well there, although when he was not in Lord Caradoc's company the only inmate of the house who could bear George company was Cicely.

Soon after breakfast Mrs. Herbert went out to the offices of Messrs. McDougall, Richards & Co. George had given her Mr. Richards's private address, as well as that of his firm, but she may have wished to satisfy herself of

his accuracy, for she simply asked of the clerk at the counter to be directed to the house in which his chief resided.

"Mr. Richards is in the office if you wish to see him," said the clerk.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Herbert. "I do not know Mr. Richards. It is his daughter I wish to see."

When she had made a note of the address that was given her, she asked a question.

"How long has Mr. Richards been living in Glasgow?" she said.

"I do not know," replied the clerk, "but he became a member of this firm last summer."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Herbert, and went away.

Peggy was at home, and when her visitor introduced herself the look of pleasure which came into her face would have repaid that good lady if she had travelled all the way up to Glasgow on purpose to see her. Mrs. Herbert told her about George and of how his presence and co-operation were valued by Lord Caradoc. Then she talked of Guy in such a way that Peggy must have divined that she knew her story, although she did not say so in so many words. The increase of animation in the girl's face and manner went to show that Mrs. Herbert was an extremely tactful woman. Then she went on to talk of Cicely and of the glories of Merrilees and ended by inviting Peggy to return with her after her round of visits should be completed to stay there for a fortnight. Peggy was plainly delighted at the idea, but was not certain of being able to obtain her father's permission. At this point Mr. Richards himself came into the room. He had returned to the house to fetch some papers which he had forgotten, but the hand of Providence must have led him, for he had never done such a thing before. He looked surprised and a little disconcerted at finding a strange lady with his daughter. This also was a thing not common in the Richards household. Mrs. Herbert introduced herself.

"I have come from a house," she said, "where Mr. Greenfield is now staying. I have known him for some time, and as I was on my way north I thought I should like to make the acquaintance of your daughter, of whom I have heard a great deal. And, if possible, your acquaintance, too, Mr. Richards."

Mr. Richards still looked at a loss. "May I ask the name of the house?" he said.

"The House of Merrilees," replied Mrs. Herbert. "May I have a few words with you alone? Peggy, my dear, I shall see you again before I go."

Peggy left the room and Mr. Richards seated himself opposite his visitor. He had not spoken since her announcement.

"I think we have met before, many years ago," said Mrs. Herbert, "although you will probably not remember me."

A curious change came over Mr. Richards's face. It was perplexed and anxious, and he sat steadily regarding his visitor as if he were striving to recall her identity, but striving in vain.

"I do not know your name," he said.

"I am the widow of Colonel Arthur Herbert," she replied, "who died seventeen years ago. We were on our honeymoon in Italy twenty-five years ago, and we met——"

"I have never been in Italy," interrupted Mr. Richards brusquely.

"Then I must have made a mistake," said Mrs. Herbert in her calm, even way. "And certainly the—the gentleman I met there, who was so singularly like you, had a different name. And another curious thing is that I remember meeting Mrs. Greenfield at the same time, and this gentleman was much in her company. So you must forgive me if I have made a mistake with such a curious set of coincidences."

"Have you seen Mrs. Greenfield of late years?" inquired Mr. Richards.

"I have not seen her since that time," replied Mrs. Herbert, "but I have seen a photograph of her, and I recognised it instantly. I have also heard a great deal about her life since those days, and I am very glad to hear that until the last few months it was a peaceful and happy one and that she had escaped some of her early troubles."

Mr. Richards took no notice of this speech.

"And what may I have the pleasure of doing for you, Mrs. Herbert?" he asked with a near approach to his business-manner.

"In the first place," said Mrs. Herbert, "I shall be very glad if you will allow your daughter to pay a visit to us at Merrilees when I return there in about a fortnight's time."

Mr. Greenfield, as you may know, is working with Lord Caradoc, who has taken a great liking to him, and he will be at Merrilees probably for the next month. Lord Caradoc and Miss Caradoc would be very pleased to see your daughter there, and I would take the greatest care of her."

"May I ask why you want my daughter to go to Merrilees?" asked Mr. Richards.

Mrs. Herbert showed no signs of surprise at this extraordinary question. "For the reason I have told you," she said. "We have heard a great deal of her from Mr. Greenfield, and we should like to have her with us for a week or two while he is there."

"You are very kind," said Mr. Richards, "but I am afraid I must decline your invitation for her."

"May I, in my turn, ask why you should object to her coming to us?" asked Mrs. Herbert.

"She is living with me here—you see how," said Mr. Richards with a movement of his hands to indicate the appointments of the commonplace little room. "It would be taking her out of her position for her to visit at a house like Merrilees."

"Do you know Merrilees?" asked Mrs. Herbert.

"Everybody knows it by repute," he replied. "I am a business man with a good position as such, but it would not be fitting that my daughter should visit at the house of a nobleman."

"We live in a very quiet way," said Mrs. Herbert, "and I think we could make your daughter happy. I hope you will reconsider your decision."

"I can't do that," he said decisively, "but I am obliged to you for your invitation."

Mrs. Herbert looked at him closely, and although he met her gaze, it was plain that he was not altogether at ease under her scrutiny.

"There is another matter I should like to discuss with you," she said. "I do not know whether you know the position I hold in Lord Caradoc's family. Probably not. I have lived with them ever since the death of my husband, and Lord Caradoc's daughter has known no other mother but me. This must explain my interest in the proposal of marriage which George Greenfield made to Lord Caradoc for his daughter."

Mr. Richards was visibly startled. "George Greenfield wants to marry Lord Caradoc's daughter!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Mrs. Herbert. "Hasn't he told you?"

"No," replied Mr. Richards, and then added, "Why should he tell me?"

"I should have thought that the reason why he might have told you was obvious," replied Mrs. Herbert. "Lord Caradoc, as I have said, is much attached to George Greenfield, and I may go as far as to say that he would welcome him as a son-in-law if the mystery of his birth were satisfactorily cleared up. That secret, Mr Greenfield has told us, is in your hands, and yours alone. And until you choose to divulge it this young man, who has made such a fine start in life with none of the advantages of birth or high connections to help him, must be content to rest under what I am assured is a perfectly undeserved stigma."

"What stigma? What do you mean?" inquired Mr. Richards.

"I mean," she replied, "that however high an opinion Lord Caradoc may have of George Greenfield's personal character—and he has a very high one indeed—and however willing he may be to put aside all questions of worldly position, he would not consider it right to allow his daughter to marry a man who for all he or anyone knows may be of illegitimate birth."

"George Greenfield is not of illegitimate birth," replied Mr. Richards.

"What proof can he show Lord Caradoc of that?" asked Mrs. Herbert. "He knows nothing of his birth. He is allowed to know nothing."

"He will know everything in time," Mr. Richards answered as if he were seeking for time to adjust his thoughts to the information which had come to him. He spoke hurriedly, and as if he were on the defensive.

"In time," repeated Mrs. Herbert. "When will he know? Next week, or in ten years, or after your death, or when? Is it fair—is it right to keep a man of his age and of his abilities in this uncertainty? When will he know?"

"I have told him that he will know. I have never told him when. And I shall not do so until the time comes."

There was a long pause. Mrs. Herbert sat with her eyes on the ground, Mr. Richards eyeing her every now and then as if he were waiting for some sort of ultimatum, and waiting for it with some misgiving. At last she raised her eyes to his and said slowly, "I think I know the secret of George Greenfield's birth."

"It is impossible that anyone should know it except myself," answered Mr. Richards instantly. But although he spoke boldly there was anxiety in his face.

"Perhaps we use the word knowledge in different senses," she replied. "Say that I only guess the story, if you like. And say that I only guess other things. Would you, do you think, be able to keep all your secrets if I carried my guesses to other people?"

Mr. Richards rose from his seat. "If you carry your guesses to anyone outside this room," he said, "the secret of George Greenfield's birth will never be known."

"You mean that you will destroy the proofs," said Mrs. Herbert, in no way disconcerted. "Would you be content to spend the rest of your life in prison, Mr. Richards?"

The man stood over her glaring at her with fierce eyes from under his heavy brows. One would have said that Mrs. Herbert's serenity was in danger of being somewhat rudely disturbed.

"How much do you know?" he asked roughly.

Then Mrs. Herbert delivered her ultimatum.

"I know," she said, "or you can call it guessing, if you like, what I shall keep entirely to myself for another month from to-day. That will give you time to end all this mystery and to set things straight. I will keep silent for a month because, unless I am obliged, I do not wish to mix myself up in the notoriety that is bound to come from the disclosures that will be made. And for your daughter's sake and that of the young man who has won her love—you see, I know a good many of your secrets, Mr. Richards—I do not wish to bring trouble upon you. I promise then, for the present, not to take any steps on my own account to clear up these mysteries, but I must make one small condition."

"What is that?" asked Mr. Richards.

"That you will let your daughter come with me to Merrilees when I return in a fortnight's time."

"She can go," said Mr. Richards ungraciously.

"Then perhaps you will be kind enough to send her to me and we can make our arrangements," said Mrs. Herbert, gathering her small belongings to her.

Mr. Richards left the room without another word.

Although the fame of his learning was spread abroad in all lands, there were certain departments of human life in which Lord Caradoc was as little qualified to conduct himself with ordinary common-sense as the least capable man in England. On George's arrival in Merrilees he found, somewhat to his surprise, that his host had for the time being lost all interest in written and printed matter, and was intent only on the works of Nature as displayed in certain nooks and corners of the island upon which the house stood. He was a much more human old gentleman when pottering around his gardens and his glass-houses than when engaged with his books, and proved himself quite a delightful companion as he initiated George into the mysteries of horticulture, while Cicely stood by with a basket and a roll of bass and mildly chaffed her learned father as she would never have ventured to do had he been discoursing on a point of constitutional law instead of on some such subject as the hybridisation of daffodils. George, of course, was supremely happy in this hourly triple companionship, and had Mrs. Herbert been at hand to see that Lord Caradoc suffered no ill effects from his unwonted excursions into the full air, the pleasant garden work might have gone on indefinitely or until he grew tired of it. Lord Caradoc, however, having ceased to be ill, bestowed no further thought on his late illness, with the result that within a week of her departure he caught another chill and became ill again. There was nothing alarming in his illness, but Cicely, who had not learned to do without her older friend in these domestic crises, judged it wise to write to Mrs. Herbert to ask her to return as soon as possible. Mrs. Herbert, who was feeling the cold very much on an exposed part of the coast of Sutherlandshire, was not sorry to respond to the summons, and came back a week earlier than she had intended, bringing Peggy with her.

Peggy, although unusually quiet and shy at first, soon expanded under the influence of her surroundings. George

and she had not met since Mrs. Greenfield's death, and she was overjoyed to be with him again. Mrs. Herbert's kindness was of the nature of a broad and well-fed stream, and never failed its recipient. And Cicely, whose girl friendships had been few, took to her from the first moment when she saw her pretty but pale and sad-eyed little face. The two girls were seldom apart after the first day, and Peggy soon lost her pallor and sadness and even showed at times signs of her old light-hearted gaiety. George's gratitude to Mrs. Herbert for rescuing her for a time from her dismal life and for bringing her and Cicely together with such happy results burned strong, and Mrs. Herbert herself was not too busy over Lord Caradoc's ailments to congratulate herself on the condition she had imposed on Mr. Richards.

For a few days the three young people at Merrilees led a life which, quiet and unexciting as it was, apparently satisfied each of them completely. George was with them the greater part of the day as they read or worked or played together in the morning room, or the music room, or wandered about the gardens or the woods, and expected only to be deprived of their society for some hours of the day when Lord Caradoc should be well enough to require his assistance in the library. Their happy and companionable mode of life, however, was broken by events of greater import than Lord Caradoc's removal from his bedroom to his library, and it is time that we took up the tale of them.

CHAPTER XXV

IMPORTANT NEWS

MR. RICHARD CALTHORP, clad in garments indicating the very latest word in unobtrusive smartness, and with smooth black hair brushed back and brushed again from off his high forehead, sat at work in his private room at the chambers of Messrs. Calthorp, Griffin and Wells, solicitors, of Lincoln's Inn Fields. It was twelve o'clock in the morning, and Mr. Calthorp looked as if he had just dropped in for half an hour before taking a pre-luncheon stroll in the park because he had nothing better to do with his time. But appearances are proverbially deceptive, and he had, as a matter of fact, sat there since eight o'clock that morning, and proposed to sit there, with a short interval for lunch, until eight o'clock in the evening. For both his partners were laid up, the one with influenza, and the other with gout, and Calthorp, when it came to an emergency, was as much to be depended on as any worker of them all within the sound of the Law Courts clock. The table in front of him was piled with orderly masses of documents, through which he was ploughing his way with methodical energy and self-possessed assurance.

There entered a clerk who put down a piece of paper in front of him, upon which was written, "T. Bridden, Floutsham."

"And who is Mr. T. Bridden of Floutsham, and what does he want?" inquired Calthorp.

"He looks like some sort of a fisherman," replied the clerk. "Floutsham is a fishing village in Cumberland, and he has come here because he has seen the advertisements relating to Merrilees."

"I am rather busy, but I think you might show him in," said Calthorp.

T. Bridden, duly shown in and appointed to a seat, proved to be a heavy looking middle-aged man with a shaggy mop of light hair and a pair of light eyes to match. The

natural expression of these would appear to have been one of piscine vacancy, but that expression was tempered for the occasion by one of slight alarm mixed with suspicion.

All this Calthorp took in at a glance.

"I will attend to you in half a minute," he said, and returned to his writing. What he wrote under cover of a paper-holder and a rampart of documents may be supposed to have been written to gratify his private sense of humour, for it had no particular bearing on the business with which he had been engaged. The words, written in the hand of copy-books, were, "The trick is an old one, but in this case it will be effective." When he had written this mysterious sentence he tore up the paper into small fragments and threw them into the basket by his side, and then leant back in his chair, adjusted his eyeglass, and said with a searching look at his visitor, "Now, Mr. T. Bridden, what can I do for you?"

T. Bridden, obviously impressed by his surroundings and the manner of his reception, turned his cap in his hands, and looking on the floor, replied, "I come for my money."

"Quite so," replied Calthorp, unmoved by this announcement, "How much money?"

"Well, last year it was twenty-five pound, and five year ago it was twenty-five pound. All the other years it's been twenty pound."

"Twenty pounds, then," said Calthorp, scribbling on a piece of paper, "And it was given to you by——"

"Yes," said the man.

"By Mr. Martin," hazarded Calthorp.

"Yes."

"Well, then, why don't you go to Mr. Martin for it now?"

"Because he's gone, and I don't know where to find him."

"Don't you think you could find him if you tried?"

"No. He's gone. Nobody knows where he is."

"Because I'm not sure that I can let you have the money. He would be sure to, if you went to him. You wouldn't have to tell anyone where he was. You could keep that dark when once you had got your money."

"But I tell you I don't know where he is."

"Well, Braithwaite, then. Couldn't you get it from Braithwaite?"

"What, Braithwaite up at the 'Three Feathers'? He's-

been there twenty year, and he don't know nothing about it."

"No, not that Braithwaite. The one at Merrilees."

"I don't know no Braithwaite at Merrilees. If he'll give it me I'll go to him."

"Where should you go to?"

"Why, to Merrilees, of course."

"Well, I don't think you would find him there. Perhaps I might be able to give you the money after all. How many years have you had it?"

"Twenty-four years. This is the twenty-fifth."

"I see. And what have you received it for?"

"For holding my tongue."

"What about? I must make certain that you are the right man."

"Well, if I tell you what about, I shan't be holding my tongue, shall I? And then you'd say that I hadn't held my tongue and I shouldn't get my twenty pound." There was a look of triumphant cunning on T. Bridden's face.

"I see you're a sharp fellow," said Calthorp. "Perhaps you are sharp enough to understand this—that if you don't tell me what you were to hold your tongue about, you won't get a penny."

T. Bridden was obviously taken aback.

"Why do you come to us for the money at all?" asked Calthorp.

T. Bridden produced a dirty-folded handbill and displayed it triumphantly.

"Thank you," said Calthorp. "That is an offer of a large reward for the tracing of Martin and Braithwaite. I thought you might have come to claim that reward, but you say you have never heard of Braithwaite."

"I can't read," admitted T. Bridden, sulkily. "But they told me your name was at the bottom of it."

"So it is. And you were quite right to come to us. Now for your story. What was the money given to you for?"

The look of cunning perched again on T. Bridden's unintelligent face. "You don't get me that way, mister," he said, "I can't read, but I'm sharp."

"Well now, Mr. Bridden, the situation is this. You have been paid twenty pounds a year for the last twenty-four years, sometimes twenty-five pounds, to keep a certain secret, which had to do with—well, I needn't say what it

had to do with. You are not going to be paid another penny for keeping it, either by Sir Roderick Bertram, who is dead, or by Martin, who has disappeared. You quite understand that, do you ? ”

“ Then what do you want to put your name at the bottom of this for ? ” inquired T. Bridden truculently.

“ That, my friend, has nothing whatever to do with your secret. You understand, then, that there is nobody—nobody at all, who is going to pay you anything more for holding your tongue. But I’ll tell you what I will do. I’ll pay you twenty pounds—no, I’ll pay you five-and-twenty—if you tell me what you were to hold your tongue about.”

T. Bridden seemed to be revolving this proposition in his slow mind.

“ Come now,” pursued Calthorp, “ it has been a good secret to you. You have made two hundred and fifty pounds by keeping it already. But you won’t make any more in that way. Let me have it, and you will go out of this room with five-and-twenty pounds in your pocket.”

“ Sovereigns ? ” inquired T. Bridden. “ He always paid me in golden sovereigns.”

“ Golden sovereigns, certainly. Wait a minute.” Calthorp rang the bell beside him. “ Give that to the cashier,” he said, handing a scrap of paper to the clerk who answered his summons. Then he returned for a minute or two to his papers until another clerk came in and put twenty-five pounds on the table beside him. “ Now then,” he said, “ that is for you when you have told me your story.”

“ Well, I’ll do it,” said T. Bridden, on whose face a gleam of satisfaction had shone at the sight of the money. “ You won’t go back on me, mister ? ”

“ Not if you tell me everything.”

“ Oh, I’ll tell you everything. It ain’t much. Well, you must know that five-and-twenty years ago on this very day as it might be——”

“ Was it on this very day ? ”

“ No. It was on the last day in March. I know because I always went to Merrilees to get the money on the last day in March. That’s so.”

“ Very well. On the last day in March twenty-five years ago—Go on.”

"I was on the shore under the lea of a boat. Must I tell you what I was there for, mister?" There was some anxiety in T. Bridden's voice.

"Not unless I ask you. This was at Floutsham, I suppose."

"Within a mile. It was after twelve o'clock at night, and it was dark and stormy. I wasn't doing any harm there."

"Never mind what you were doing."

T. Bridden seemed relieved, and proceeded with more assurance. Calthorp let him tell his tale without interruption, and his tale, shorn of some digressions, and translated into intelligible language, was as follows:—

"There was half a gale blowing, and it was very dark. One minute I was looking out to sea or as far as I could carry, and there was nothing there. Then I looked landwards, and the next minute I looked out to sea again, and there was a boat grounded on the beach, not much further off than I am from you. I hadn't heard a sound. I was just about to hail her, because—well, because of what I might have been expecting, you understand, or what I might not have been expecting. But I saw directly that she wasn't any boat I might have had anything to do with. There was a lot of men in her, and a dark something that I couldn't rightly make out at first, amidships. I squatted down under the lea of the ketch where I had been standing and looked to see what would follow. Then a tall man in a long cloak came and stood just against me, so near that I could have touched him if I'd put out my hand. I daren't move, so I squatted there as still as a mouse, and him and me watched everything that went on, together, as you might say.

"Well, I saw what they took out of the boat when they rested it for a minute on the beach. It was a coffin. I didn't rightly know what to make of it, and I don't mind telling you, mister, that I'd as soon have been at home in bed as where I was. Then they took a sort of little cart out of the boat and hoisted the coffin on to that, and, just as I'd seen that, the man who'd stood quite still by me while all this was going on took a step backwards right on to me.

"I hadn't time to call out or do nothing. He was on me like a dog on a rat, and caught me by the throat, and held me till I began to choke. His fingers were like iron, and

his arms, too, and I couldn't stir. I could just see his face, and it fair frightened me, it was so fierce. But I didn't want that to frighten me, neither. His hands were choking the life out of me, and I thought I was done for. But just as I thought I was gone, another man came up and said something to him. I couldn't hear what it was, for my ears was singing, and he didn't so much as lay a finger on him to stop him choking me. But he stopped all the same, and took his hand off my throat, and as I lay there by the boat coming to myself again the two men talked to one another quietly within a stride of me.

"I'm not likely to forget it. The wind was bitter cold and wet with the spray, and it took hold of the cloak of the tall man and blew it so that it touched my face. But he stood there as firm as a rock. And I could make out the coffin and the men standing by it waiting through the blackness. I couldn't hear what the two was saying because of the wind howling, and besides, the breath had been almost choked out of me, and I was coughing and coming to. But I thought I was done for. I thought there'd been one murder, and there'd be another, or at least they'd rope me up and take me out to sea.

"But it wasn't long before the man what had nearly choked me moved away, and the other began to talk to me. First he told me that I wasn't hurt, and then he said he'd been told to give me ten pounds for what had been done to me, and I wasn't to say or think any more about it. And he gave me the money there and then. Then he said, 'Are you satisfied with that?' and I said 'yes.' 'Well,' he said, 'and on this day twelvemonth you'll get another ten pound if you do as I tell you, but you'll have to listen carefully,' he said, 'and take in what I say.' So I said I was ready, for I'd got over the handling a bit then, and I'd got the money and wanted more.

"He said, 'You have heard of Sir Roderick Bertram?' I said 'yes.' He said, 'That's him standing there. And in that coffin is the body of his lady who's died in foreign parts. And Sir Roderick is taking her body home,' he said, 'but he don't want anyone to know it. That's why he's landed here in the dead of the night. Now there's nothing wrong in that, is there?' he said. 'No,' I said. 'But choking the life out of a man who's done him no harm's another thing.' 'You've been paid for that,' he

said, 'and you said you were satisfied. The gentleman was angry at finding there was somebody looking on when he thought he was alone. He didn't mean to do you any harm.' 'Well,' I said, 'we'll say no more about that.' 'That's right,' he said, 'and I see you're a sensible man. Now you won't get anything by telling what you've seen, and if you was to tell everybody nothing would come of it, for there's nothing been done that's against the law,' he said, 'and you'd only make Sir Roderick angry, and he might want to know what you're doing here at this time of night, when everybody's asleep. He's a magistrate.' I told him I wasn't doing any harm and he said, 'I shan't want to know what you were doing as long as you keep what you've seen to yourself. And on this day next year if nothing has got out about this work to-night you can come to Merrilees,' he said, 'and ask for Mr. Martin, and I'll give you another ten pound, and ten pound every year when you come for it, if you say nothing to nobody.' 'But mind,' he said, 'if you say a word of what you've seen to anybody, even to your wife,' but I hadn't got a wife, mister, and never have had, 'it'll be bound to get out,' he said, 'and you'll lose ten pounds a year for life.'

"So I promised I never would say nothing to nobody, and he went away, and I stopped where I was and saw them wheel the coffin up the beach, all marching together, quick-like, and when I couldn't see them no more because of the blackness I heard them tramp, tramp along the road which leads inland, and listened till I couldn't hear nothing but the wind."

"And the boat?" asked Calthorp.

"The boat had already rowed off, and I was left alone on the beach."

"Then you went to Merrilees a year after?"

"Yes, and Mr. Martin, he said Sir Roderick had told him to give me twenty pounds instead of ten. He said he hadn't thought the secret could have been kept so well, but as nobody knew it and a year had gone by he'd make it worth my while to keep it always."

"And you never did tell a soul?"

"No, not me. And every year I went and drewed my twenty pound same as if it was the bank."

"Why did you get twenty-five pounds on two occasions?"

"Well, I asked for it. I asked for fifty. I said it was worth it. But Mr. Martin, he said no. He said if I had all that money it would set people wondering where I got it from. And he wouldn't give me no more than twenty-five. But he give me that twice. And I wasn't going to lose my twenty pound regular for sticking out for more."

"Well, you seem to have kept the secret well. You don't know where Sir Roderick's lady was buried, I suppose?"

"No. I don't know nothing more but what I've told you."

"And you never saw Sir Roderick when you went over to Merrilees?"

"No. I only saw Mr. Martin. He met me at the Lodge and paid me the money, and I went away again."

"Very well, then. There's nothing more I want to ask you. Here's your twenty-five pounds."

"And that's all I shall get, then, mister?"

"No, it isn't quite all. You'll hold your tongue about this a bit longer, and when I don't care whether you hold your tongue any more or not I'll send you another five pounds."

"Five pounds isn't much, mister."

"You seem to be of an avaricious nature, Mr. Bridden. No, it isn't much, but it's better than nothing, and that's what you'll get if you let it out."

"Well, I've held my tongue for five and twenty years. I dare say I can hold it a bit longer. When shall I get the five pounds?"

"When I send it to you. Give me your address and put your mark to this paper. It is a receipt for the money I've given you."

T. Bridden having complied with these requests took his departure, leaving Calthorp to digest the information he had received. His cogitations resulted in a telegram being despatched to Guy in Paris, "Important news. Please come over at once;" and when this had been sent off Calthorp returned refreshed to his labours.

Guy had settled down to a steady spell of work, and although his previous unsettled mode of life often influenced him with a desire for change and idleness, and at times the regularity and drudgery of his work irked him

exceedingly, he had so far resisted all desires to relinquish it even for a day, and had toiled on steadily during the two months he had spent in Paris. Calthorp's message came as a relief to his drudgery. He crossed the Channel on the same evening, and put in an early appearance at Calthorp's office the next morning.

"Well, what is the important news?" he asked. "You might have given me a hint."

"I shouldn't have satisfied you if I had," replied Calthorp, on whose usually impassive face satisfaction reigned triumphant. "I could only have told you yesterday that we were on the track of Lady Bertram's burying place."

"Oh, hang Lady Bertram's burying-place! I want to get hold of Martin."

"Well, I hope you will now. I'm on the track of him; but that has happened since I sent you my wire."

"Out with it!" exclaimed Guy, excitedly. "Good heavens! I'd given up all hope of this."

"Well, I've received information that Braithwaite landed in Liverpool from America on Tuesday. This is Thursday, and he is in an hotel there doing nothing. I've got two men watching him."

"Why on earth don't you get him arrested?"

"Because it is pretty obvious that he is waiting in Liverpool till he gets some sort of summons from Martin. What does a man like that want to kick his heels in an hotel for? We keep an eye on him till he sets out to meet Martin. Then we follow him and nab them both."

"You think that they are going to take steps to dispose of their booty at last?"

"Probably. Otherwise why should Braithwaite, who succeeded in getting safely away to America, come back and put his head in a noose?"

"I hope to goodness he won't give us the slip again."

"Not much chance of that. There are two smart men keeping an eye on him day and night, and he hasn't an idea of it. And there's another man watching the arriving boats, in case Martin should be coming from America too. But I think he's hiding in England. He's been seen in London, you know."

"What about the other business? Does it lead to anything?"

"You shall hear." And Calthorp told him of the information he had received the day before.

"It's a curious story," said Guy, when he had finished. "What do you make of it?"

"Lady Bertram is buried somewhere on the island, and Sir Roderick is buried with her."

"But we have searched everywhere and found no possible burying place."

"Then we must search again."

"Why on the island? That doesn't follow from this man's story."

"I think it does. Sir Roderick wanted to have his wife's body always near him, and as you know, he never left the island. Now, I'll tell you what I think. There is some hiding place about the house. It is big enough and part of it quite old enough to make that possible. And I also think, though this is only conjecture, that when we have found Lady Bertram's body and Sir Roderick's body, which will be with it, we shall find the jewels in the same hiding-place. Even if Martin took some of the jewels away with him, I don't believe he could have taken them all, and if there is a secret place, as there must be, it would be natural that he should put them there for safety. He and Braithwaite are evidently on the point of taking advantage of this robbery, and I believe that when they come together they will make for Merrilees. We must keep a close watch there. In fact, I have given instructions that they are not to be arrested at once, but followed wherever they go."

"Isn't that rather dangerous?"

"Not very, with the close watch that will be kept on them. We want the jewels. Supposing that Martin were to be arrested and then refuse to say where they were. It is not likely, but it is possible. He is going to guide us to the place where they are hidden."

"I don't much like the plan. A bird in the hand, you know. But perhaps you are right. And who is going to receive these gentlemen when they go to Merrilees, if they do go?"

"I think you must. Someone must be there. I can't go myself, at least not just to sit down and wait. I'm single-handed here. But I'll come when I hear they've started. But I want you to go up there to-day and stay there."

"You seem to forget that I've let the house to Lord Caradoc."

"No I don't. There was a clause in the lease. And you can go up and pay them a visit."

Guy hesitated. "I have got a standing invitation," he said, "but I don't quite like to take advantage of it to play the detective in what is now practically his house and not mine."

"My dear fellow, I'm as punctilious as you about that sort of thing, but this isn't a time to stand on ceremony. I didn't put that clause in the lease for fun, and it was explained to Lord Caradoc. Besides, if you go up you may be able to save them from some annoyance. You won't have anything to do—simply to stay there and keep your eyes open, and wire to me if anything happens. I shall have men round the place, but I want somebody in the house itself."

"I could write and propose myself for a visit."

"You must send a wire to say you're coming, and go up to-day. If you don't I must send a man. I'm conducting the case and I'm not going to throw away chances."

In the end Guy allowed himself to be persuaded. He sent a long telegram announcing his arrival, and left London by the two o'clock train. Just before he left his rooms he received a note from Bobby Conder :

"DEAR GUY,

"I'm back from my travels. I want to see you particularly as I have brought a mysterious communication for you all the way from the back blocks of Australia. Dine with me to-night at the Bachelors' at eight o'clock, and I'll hand it over.

"Yours ever,

"R. CONDER."

To which Guy replied :

"Welcome home. Just off to Merrilees. Write to me there."

Bobby Conder had not given much thought to the communication which had been packed away amongst the papers in his despatch box for the last few months. Now that he had reached home, however, his curiosity began to

burn a little. He took out the packet and read the instructions written by the old squatter. He was not allowed to send the paper by post. He must put it into the hands of the owner of Merrilees. It occurred to him that he might assist at an exciting discovery if he did so at Merrilees itself. The result of his further musings was that another message was received at Merrilees during the course of that afternoon to the effect that Mr. Robert Conder proposed to journey thither on the following day to pay his respects to his uncle and cousin after his recent return from his travels.

CHAPTER XXVI

MARTIN AT LAST

ON the surprise and delight of Guy when he arrived at Merrilees and found Peggy there we cannot linger. Events now began to move fast, and we must follow their development closely. Suffice it to say that when the announcement of his visit had reached Merrilees, Peggy had written to her father, but had received no reply to her letter, and remained where she was while the house of Merrilees witnessed the final scenes of the strange drama which had been played within its walls.

Lord Caradoc, who by this time was downstairs again, had apparently forgotten all about the mystery connected with the house he inhabited. He seemed annoyed at the idea of its becoming the centre of notoriety once more, and could not see, if Martin wanted to put a large collection of jewels into a place of safety, why he should not have taken the obvious course of sending them to the bank. He expressed himself, however, with gratitude towards Guy for coming up to the house to receive the expected visitors. He seemed to be under the impression that he might, otherwise, have had to interview them himself, which he would not have liked at all. He said that he hoped Guy would do exactly what he liked in the house, but he should beg to be allowed to keep the inner library for his own exclusive use. He knew the contents of every square inch of that room, and he could assure him that there were no jewels there whatever.

On the night of Guy's arrival he and Mrs. Herbert and George sat up late discussing the bearing of Calthorp's news. Mrs. Herbert seemed exceedingly disturbed at the idea of anything happening in the house. She impressed upon both young men the necessity of keeping everything from the two girls, and she seemed more anxious that Peggy should know nothing of what possibly might happen even than Cicely. She could not deny that Calthorp's inferences seemed to be justified and that they

were likely to undergo experiences in that quiet house within the next few days which would certainly prove disturbing, and might even be terrifying. George and Guy decided that they would not take any of the men about the house into their confidence. If Martin and Braithwaite came to the house they would come alone, and they would come with Calthorp's detectives hard on their heels. There would be enough of them to capture the two men without running the risk of giving them warning by taking outsiders into confidence. Before they went to bed, very late, they went over the lower part of the house, but saw nothing and heard nothing in any way unusual.

Nothing happened on the following morning. George and Guy slipped out after breakfast to find the men who were keeping watch round the walls of the park. They found them at different points in the guise of artists wandering round with sketching apparatus ostentatiously displayed to find a good position for a picture. All three, although their appearance was not strikingly artistic, seemed well up to the work they had in hand, and gave assurances, each of them, that it would be very difficult for anyone to get past them. The two young men returned to the house.

In the afternoon Calthorp began to work the telegraph wires. He had taken the precaution before Guy left town of supplying him with a cipher, and the post-mistress of Morthwaite was exercised during the latter part of the day in taking down a series of perfectly unintelligible messages. When these were deciphered they ran as follows :

12.45. Braithwaite has received a telegram. Is preparing to leave Liverpool. Am coming up by 2.0 train. Please send conveyance to meet me at Keswick. Calthorp.

2.45. Braithwaite left Liverpool by 1.55 train and booked to Keswick. Both men are travelling with him. Our Mr. Calthorp on his way to Merrilees. Calthorp, Griffin, Wells.

4.7. Wire received from Preston. Braithwaite left for Keswick 3.15. Both men following in same train. No signs of Martin. Calthorp, Griffin, Wells.

5.58. Braithwaite reached Penrith and changed for Keswick. Still no signs of Martin. Tell men at Merrilees to keep a sharp look out. Calthorp, Griffin, Wells.

George and Guy went out again, and finding one of the

pretended artists still restlessly wandering about in search of a view point, told him the news, which he promised to hand on to the others.

At about seven o'clock a telegram came, still in the same cipher, from Keswick, from one of the men who had shadowed Braithwaite from Liverpool :

Regret to inform you that when train arrived Keswick Braithwaite had disappeared. Was in next carriage at Threlkeld. Must have jumped out while train in motion. Are driving to Morthwaite. Tell men to keep sharp look out. Brown.

George and Guy looked at one another. "What fools those fellows are," said Guy angrily. "Why weren't they in the same carriage?"

"I expect they were afraid of being sized up," said George. "Of course the fellow would be suspicious of everybody. There are several changes between Liverpool and Keswick at which they must have shown themselves, and one of them continually going to the telegraph office might make him think they were on his track, however careful they were. However, unless he had a conveyance of some sort waiting for him at the place where he jumped off they will be here before him. And it isn't likely that he would have. He is much more likely to have broken his leg."

They went out once more to inform the detectives of what had happened. The other two men arrived at about eight o'clock, much chagrined at the escape of their quarry.

"It was very difficult to keep out of the way, sir," said one of them. "He must have suspected us. We were in different carriages, one on each side of his, and we kept a look-out between the stations. But there is a tunnel. He must have got off d'reckly we got out of it. That was the only place we could have missed seeing him."

"You saw no one on your journey who could possibly answer to the description of Martin?" asked Guy.

"No, sir; no one."

"They will meet somewhere between Keswick and here, probably," said George. "What are you two men going to do?"

"We thought we'd better join the others outside, sir."

"They are outside the park," said Guy, "and the wall is

at least five miles round. You had better stop on the island, I think. Don't you, George?"

"Yes, certainly," said George. "They might very well get past twenty men outside the walls. But they will find it difficult to land on the island unnoticed."

"You two had better get something to eat and then go out and watch," said Guy. "They are not likely to come till late at night, and then I don't see how they are to get across. I have told a man to watch the boats all night, though he doesn't know why. But we'd better not run any risks. Go out as soon as you have finished your meal. Mr. Calthorp will be here about ten o'clock with another gentleman. There will be plenty of us to give you a hand when they come, and we shall be on the watch and shall hear you when you call."

Dinner and the hour that followed it wore away somehow. It was as much as the two young men could do, in the excited state of their nerves, to talk and act as if nothing unusual were going on. Lord Caradoc had forgotten that there was anything unusual, and neither Cicely nor Peggy had ever known. But Mrs. Herbert was as nervous as George and Guy, and the conversation round the dinner table that evening was not remarkable for sustained interest. It was over before nine o'clock. Lord Caradoc retired to the library, and the two younger men were left to themselves. They went out and visited the watchers on the island and outside the walls. Nothing had been seen. When they returned they found that Mrs. Herbert had sent the two girls to bed, although it was only just past ten o'clock. Then followed a tedious hour in which the three of them discussed all over again what they had already discussed a dozen times before, more for the sake of passing the time than because they expected to get any new light on the mystery. At eleven o'clock George and Guy rowed over to meet Calthorp and Bobby Conder at the landing stage. Their train had been delayed, and it was nearly half an hour later before the carriage that brought them could be heard rumbling down the hill, and its lights shone out of the darkness as it turned a corner of the wooded road and bore down upon them.

Calthorp stepped out of the carriage alert and eager.

"Has anything happened?" he asked anxiously.

"Braithwaite gave your men the slip," replied Guy.

"I know. I got a wire at Keswick. Nothing been seen of them since?"

"No, nothing. Brown and the other men are watching on the island. The other three are outside the wall."

"That's right," said Calthorp. "Let us go across."

Bobby Conder now came forward and shook hands with Guy and George. "Come up just in time to lend a hand," he said with a twinkle in his eye as they stepped into the boat. There would have been a broad grin on his face but that he was rather subdued by the importance of the crisis on which they were entering.

"What is this message you have brought for me?" asked Guy.

"I'll tell you when we get into the house," he said.

They landed at the foot of the stairs. A dark figure glided out from behind the trees on the right, spoke a few words to Calthorp, and disappeared again into the darkness. The two men on the island were keeping a close watch.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Bobby as they mounted the terraces and a gleam of the moon from behind the scudding clouds showed the white façade of the house above them.

"They are quite right to call this place a fairy palace."

"Yes. And we are going to scotch the ogre to-night," said Calthorp.

Supper was laid in the dining room, and old Feltham waited upon them as he had done on that night nine months before when the disappearance of Sir Roderick's dead body had first been made known. The old man was now well on in years and his powers were beginning to fail. Nothing had been said to him of what was expected to happen, and they dismissed him and his attendant footman as soon as possible.

"What is your message, Bobby?" asked Guy as soon as the four men were left together. "Has it anything to do with this business? If not it had better keep a bit."

Bobby Conder drew the little packet of papers from his pocket. "It is quite possible that it may have some bearing on it," he said, and he told them shortly of the way in which the papers had come into his hands, and read out the instructions the old squatter had given to his grandson. They listened to him with breathless attention.

"It is the story of the secret chamber," said Calthorp, "and it has come from the other side of the world in the nick of time."

Guy took the worn and yellow packet into his hands and turned it over.

"Open it and read it out," said Calthorp. "It may tell us exactly what we want to know."

Guy broke the seal and disclosed a folded sheet of paper with close writing on its four sides. It began without any preamble:—

"In the summer of 17— I was employed with many others, mostly Italians, in rebuilding the house of Merri-les, Morthwaite, Cumberland, for Sir Michael Bertram, Bart., and in constructing the terraces and the channel for the water. The mason's work had been going on for over a year and was almost finished. I was called one morning into the office of the overseer of the works with four others, all Englishmen and good reliable workmen, and we were told that when the Italians had been sent away we five would be kept on at a large increase in wages to do some more mason's work, on the condition that we should keep that work secret. After some difficulty all of us agreed to do so, and were made to sign papers to that effect. Then we were told what the work was to be, and for the next three months we were kept busy at it.

"The work was this. First of all we dug out a tunnel and constructed a staircase which led from the floor of the old disused chapel in the west wing of the house right under the terraces outside till it ended at a point immediately beneath the cascade and below the level of the lake. Then we dug out of the solid rock a chamber as far as I remember about fourteen feet square. After that we tunnelled again right under the lake and made a passage which came out at the little Pagan temple which had been built as a summer house in a thick grove of trees on the west bank of the lake. Most of our tunnelling was done through the solid rock, and when we came to earth we built up the passage with stone, but there was very little earth till we began to push up to the temple. The approaches to the staircase and tunnel were quite open at this time, but all other work about the house had been left off while we were so employed, and no one was allowed inside the walls

of the park. So no one knew what was going on, and we were bound to secrecy by our oath.

"When the work was finished the other four men were dismissed, but I was kept on along with a blacksmith who had also been sworn to secrecy. We were given instructions as to how the approaches to this chamber were to be concealed, and carried out the work in a short time. The approach from the chapel is under the old stone altar. The north side of the altar is one solid block of stone. It moves on iron pivots in the middle if it is pushed with some force from the side nearest the wall, and there is no fastening except a slight self-acting spring when it gets back into its natural position. When it is opened to its full extent there is room for a man to creep through to the stairs which lead down into the chamber. The approach from the temple to the tunnel under the lake is something similar. The moving stone is one that supports the platform at the top of the little flight of steps underneath the pillars. It is on the north side.

"When our work was finished I was paid off, but the blacksmith was kept on. What further work he was given to do I do not know, as I left that part of the country very soon afterwards and never saw him again.

"I do not know the intentions of Sir Michael Bertram in building this chamber and these passages. But if in after years they are used wrongly and trouble comes from it this statement may put things right. I shall be dead when it is used, if it ever is, and Sir Michael Bertram is dead already. I do not consider that I have broken my oath of secrecy by writing this down and sealing it up.

"JOHN RAWLINGS."

Very little notice was paid to the last part of the stonemason's confession. In fact Guy omitted the final paragraph entirely. The four men rose to their feet in uncontrollable excitement. The doings of Martin and Braithwaite had gone out of their heads completely for the moment.

"Come along," said Guy, and he snatched up a heavy silver candlestick that stood on the table and made for the door.

"No, no. Wait," said Calthorp. "Wait till the coast is clear. The servants are still about."

"Ring for Feltham and tell him to send them to bed," said George.

"The chapel is quite away from the rest of the house," said Guy. "You can only get to it from the outside and from the second floor. The other entrances have been blocked up. We must get at the chapel through Sir Roderick's rooms. They are not used and nobody is there."

"We had better all take candles," said George, "and, by Jove! Supposing Martin and Braithwaite are there!"

"Get some thick sticks," said Calthorp. "I've got this," and he put his hand into a side pocket and showed a glimpse of a wicked-looking little revolver.

They made a move to the hall where a row of candlesticks was standing on a side table.

"What about those men on the island?" asked Bobby Conder. "It's no use their watching for a boat. The fellows will come through the tunnel from the temple."

"Yes," said Calthorp. "I'll go and send them both over there to watch. If they haven't come yet they will catch them nicely, and if they have, *we* shall. Wait here till I come back." He was out of the house in a moment.

The others went into the cloak room leading out of the hall and selected three heavy sticks. The grin on Bobby's face could no longer be kept back. George was very serious and Guy quivering with excitement. Calthorp returned in a few minutes.

"I have sent them over in a boat," he said. "Now then."

Guy led the way up to the second floor. They passed through the door which led into that part of the house which had been occupied by Sir Roderick Bertram, through the other door at the end of the broad corridor and down the winding turret stair, treading softly one after the other. They reached the gloomy little chapel, and as they entered it their candles flickered and a waft of cold night air met them. The heavy oak door which gave access to the chapel from the outside stood ajar. They looked at one another and Bobby Conder's grin disappeared.

They turned to the side of the altar, but first of all Calthorp closed and secured the open door. The great stone stood open, turned on its pivot, disclosing a narrow stair leading down in the darkness. Each of the four men

pressed forward. George squeezed himself through first, followed by Calthorp, Guy and Bobby. "Don't make a sound," whispered Calthorp, as they crept down the stair.

The steps took a slight turn to the right and ran down obliquely. The sounds of their advance were drowned by the murmur of the falling water. Down, down, they went. The stair seemed as if it would never end. The murmur presently became a roar as the cascade rushed down to the lake immediately above their heads. But the old masons had done their work well. The passage was as dry as when they had made it a hundred years before. Presently the rushing of the water ceased. They were below the waters of the lake, but still the steps led downwards.

Calthorp whispered a halt. "Leave the candles here," he said. "We do not want to give them a warning."

They put the four candlesticks against the wall and continued their downward way more cautiously than before. The sound of falling water had died away completely. George suddenly stopped with his finger to his lips. The stair took a turn to the left immediately in front of him, and the passage broadened. He peeped round the corner and stepped back instantly. The other three crowded behind him. Some ten or fifteen yards below them there was a door, not quite shut. Between it and the wall was a dim line of light.

They stood where they were for a few moments in complete silence. There was no sound of voices, but they heard movements, heavy steps on a stone floor.

"Creep down all together," whispered Calthorp. "I will throw open the door. George and Guy tackle the one nearest to us. Bobby and I will seize the other. Now then, ready!"

The sounds within the chamber had ceased. They crept stealthily down, and stood for a moment nerving themselves for the rush.

George put his shoulder to the door and dashed it open with a crash. Then he fell back with a cry, which was echoed by his side. Calthorp and Bobby Conder had taken two steps into the chamber. They found themselves looking into the muzzle of a revolver held straight towards them.

In the middle of the chamber stood a man facing them. He said nothing, but eyed them fiercely, still covering them

with his weapon. But it was not the circle of the revolver's muzzle that held them back on the threshold.

The walls of the chamber were faced with dressed stone. Two lighted candles were held by sconces fixed to them. On the floor, in some disorder, were many wooden cases, and directly behind the man, who stood like a statue in the middle of the chamber, was a raised bed. On it lay a man and a woman side by side. They were fully dressed, but the woman's dress, although beautiful in texture, was old-fashioned and yellow with age. They lay there as if asleep, a dark and handsome pair. Not one of the four young men but knew that they were looking on the bodies of Sir Roderick Bertram and his long-dead wife.

The narrow chamber and all it contained flashed on to their sight and was fixed on their brains indelibly. They stood there at the entrance while a clock might have ticked out three seconds. The man stood facing them with his levelled weapon.

Then suddenly before they could realise it the scene suddenly changed into one of dire confusion and horror. A harsh grinding sound from overhead broke the silence. They caught sight of the man's face changed to an expression of terror, and his revolver lowered, and then they were plunged into a hissing darkness and suddenly involved in a swirl of choking water. They turned with one accord and fought their way madly up the narrow stair, the water pouring upwards after them with angry eddy and turmoil. Bobby Conder was knocked down once and would have been lost had not his flung-out hand caught that of George, who jerked him to his feet and continued the breathless race upwards. They came to the place where they had left their candles, but the water was still surging above their knees, and the light which had guided them was suddenly changed again to black darkness. But now they were saved, and under the roar of the cascade paused, gasping and terror-struck, while the water just below them subsided into a level floor, even with the surface of the lake outside.

"He is down there," sobbed Guy. "It came from the roof. I saw it strike him down."

"We can't save him," gasped Calthorp. "Let us get up."

They made their way up in silence, dripping and ex-

hausted by the shock and the struggle, until they stood once more on the stone floor of the little chapel. They opened the outer door, trembling and fumbling at the heavy iron bolts, and stood once more in the light, for the moon had broken through the clouds and shone on the peaceful bosom of the lake, under which lay the dead in their watery grave, three now where there had been two resting quietly.

Two men came running up the terraces towards them as they moved away from the shadow of the house and the trees.

"They are on the island," shouted the foremost, as he descried the little group, and when he had come up to them, "We found the entrance to the tunnel and went down. The water met us and we got away just in time. They must have got through and flooded the passage."

"Where is Braithwaite?" asked George sharply.

In answer Calthorp began running down the terraces by the way the two men had come up. "The boat!" he cried.

The others followed him, but he was some way ahead of them. The boat by which the two men had put themselves over lay at the bottom of the steps. They saw a man dart out from among the trees, throw himself into it, and cut at the painter with a knife. But Calthorp was upon him. There was a short and sharp struggle, and then the others came up, and in a very short time Braithwaite was standing on the lower steps of the stair handcuffed between the two detectives.

He looked round on the six men sullenly.

"Where is Martin?" he asked.

"Martin is drowned," replied Calthorp.

CHAPTER XXVII

MRS. HERBERT'S STORY

It may be imagined that there was little sleep for the actors in this final catastrophe that night. The house was silent and asleep now, but Braithwaite was taken by his captors into the dining-room, where the unfinished supper still remained on the table. There the four young men, after they had changed their clothes, joined them.

"Now you needn't say anything," said Calthorp to him. "Whatever you do say will be used in evidence at your trial."

"Trial? What for?" asked the man.

"Why, for stealing Sir Roderick's body and the jewels," replied Calthorp.

"I haven't stolen anything," said Braithwaite. "And no more did Martin. What we had was given to us. Sir Roderick's body has been resting peaceful where he wished it to be, and the jewels are there too. Neither of us took a single one, nor meant to."

"The jewels belong to Sir Guy Bertram, here," said Calthorp. "Whatever you meant to do with them you have kept them hidden from him for nearly a year. There won't be much difficulty about bringing you to trial, I think."

"I may as well tell you all I know," said Braithwaite. "I've done nothing wrong. I've only done what Martin told me and what Sir Roderick wished. And now they're both dead there's no reason to keep silence."

The ex-gardener did not look like a criminal, but a self-possessed and intelligent if somewhat morose-looking young man. He had received the news of his fellow-conspirator's terrible death without much sign of emotion, and even his present situation, as he stood handcuffed between the two detectives, did not seem greatly to disturb his composure.

Calthorp eyed him narrowly as he seated himself at the table.

"You can take those things off," he said to the men, "and wait outside till I call for you."

Braithwaite was delivered of the irons on his wrists and the two men left the room.

"Now then," said Calthorp, "I've warned you. But you probably won't lose anything by telling a true and straightforward tale."

And this was the tale that Braithwaite told, while the four men sat still and listened with all their ears:

"Sir Roderick and Martin had secrets together. About five years ago they began to take me into some of them, but I never knew much. Martin told me he'd seen I could keep things to myself, and if I would do what I was told I shouldn't be asked to do anything wrong, and I should be well paid for it.

"He told me about the vault down there and what was in it. But I was never allowed to go there, and I couldn't have found out the way. All I'd got to do was to wait for Sir Roderick's death, and when that took place I was to help Martin to embalm his body in a way which he told me, and to help him to take it down there and lay it by the side of my lady. Then I was to clear out to America with a thousand pounds and hold my tongue.

"When Sir Roderick died last June Martin was away in London. They sent him word, but when he came Sir Roderick was past knowing him. He was terrible upset. It seemed as if he didn't know what to do. But that night we carried the body of our master out of his room and did what we had been told and laid it beside the other.

"Then Martin told me that he'd sworn to Sir Roderick to keep something secret till the 14th of March this year—that's to-morrow—and it had to do with the jewels amongst other things. So we took and packed them in boxes and carried them down to the vault.

"Then Martin gave me a hundred pounds in gold and said I was to go over to America and he would send the rest of the money that had been promised to me when I got there. But he said that I must come over again to be ready to do something this March. I promised him and I went away. We trusted each other. We got through the tunnel under the lake and through the little gate at the other end of the park.

"I settled in New York and he sent me the money. He wrote to me from Glasgow. Sir Roderick had given him a great deal of money, and he had changed his name and

gone into business there. Last month he wrote and told me to come over and stay in Liverpool till I heard from him. He sent me money for my passage. When I got there he wrote and told me to meet him at eleven o'clock to-night by the temple. I was to be careful and not be seen in case of the place being watched. I started off by train and found that these two men were following me. I jumped off the train just as we got through a tunnel and didn't hurt myself. Then I walked across the hills to the other end of the park. I saw the entrance was being watched. I went to another, and saw that was watched too. Then a man came out from the trees and I thought I was caught. But it was Martin. We helped each other over the wall and got into the vault through the passage under the lake. Then we went up through the chapel and outside. We saw the two men watching the shores of the island.

"Then Martin took me down through the trees by the side of the steps to the lake. He scraped away the earth under a bush and there was a stone, which he lifted. Under it was a sort of handle. He said if that was turned round as far as it would go the vault and tunnels would be flooded. I was to turn it and let the water in when I got a signal from him.

"I went up with him again and stayed behind a tree near the chapel door. He said he was going to carry the boxes of jewels into the chapel, and it might take him half an hour or an hour. The chapel door was to be kept a little open, and when he shut it I was to go down and turn the handle.

"Martin said we were safe, because, although I had been tracked, no one would think we could get on to the island without a boat. I asked him how we were to get away again with the tunnel flooded and the boats watched. He said we shouldn't want to get away. He said Sir Guy Bertram was in the house, and when he had done what he wanted to he should tell him what he wanted to know. But he shouldn't tell him about Sir Roderick's body nor about the vault, and I was to keep that secret too.

"Then he went into the chapel and I waited there. I didn't hear him inside, but I was some way off and only looking for the door to be shut.

"At last I heard him as I thought shut the door. I suppose it was one of you gentlemen. But how was I to

know? Poor fellow! I wish I had known. I went down and turned the handle. It was very stiff, and I tried with all my might before I could move it. At last I did it, and then I saw the water turning round and round in the lake a few yards from the shore, and heard it rushing below me. It shook the ground where I was standing.

"Then I went up to the chapel door and waited. You nearly caught me when you came out. I suppose I lost my head. I ran down to the lake through the trees and saw the two men coming up the stairs. Then I saw their boat and tried to get away in it. And that's all I know, sir, and all I've done."

Calthorp, busy with pencil and note-book, asked a few questions, but the man had evidently told all that he knew, and the real mystery was still unfathomed. The other three sat silent.

"Well," said Calthorp, "you've told us a plain story, but of course you'll have to tell it again. The warrant for your arrest has been out for a good many months." He summoned the men who were waiting outside the room. "You can take him across to Morthwaite," he said, "and one of you had better tell the three others that their work is over."

Braithwaite made no further remark and no resistance. He left the room quietly with his captors.

"That explains the disappearance of Sir Roderick's body," said Calthorp, when the four were alone again. "What the hiding of the jewels means, I don't know. Perhaps we never shall know now that Martin is dead, but the chief thing is that we have got them back."

"The jewels are buried beneath fathoms of water," said Bobby Conder.

"It will not be a difficult matter to get them out. The jewels, and—and whatever else is there besides. Oh, my God—that was an awful moment!"

Calthorp had listened to Braithwaite's story with the same cool, alert air as he had listened to Bridden's the morning before, and he had spoken afterwards as if wholly uninfluenced by the scene of horror he had been through. Now suddenly he was a weak, broken man. He put his head on his arm and sobbed.

The others took no more notice of his outbreak than if it were the most natural thing in the world. Bobby

Conder's round cheerful face was very grave, and George and Guy sat in their chairs pale and troubled.

Calthorp pulled himself together almost instantly.

"Poor devil," he said, "Poor, poor devil!"

"You don't know everything yet," said Guy huskily.

"Don't know everything? Why, what more is there to know?"

"You don't know who it is that lies drowned down there?"

"It's Martin. Surely it's Martin."

"Yes, I suppose it is Martin. But Martin was—you tell him, George."

"You heard Braithwaite say that Martin had gone into business in Glasgow and changed his name," said George. "I have known him under that other name all my life. It was Richards, poor little Peggy's father, who stood there when we went in. And we shall have to tell her to-morrow morning."

Calthorp looked from one to the other. But it was plain that his keen orderly brain had given way for the moment and was unable to take in new impressions.

"You must tell me to-morrow," he said. "I can't get hold of it to-night. I'm going to bed."

"We had better all go to bed, I think," said Bobby Conder. "We have had a narrow escape, and we'd better think it over."

He and Calthorp went out of the room. Guy and George were left facing one another. Both of them had much to say to one another, but neither of them knew where to begin, and they stood in awkward silence, their eyes on the ground.

The door of the room opened again and Mrs. Herbert came in. She looked anxiously from one to the other and noticed their troubled faces.

"Something dreadful has happened," she exclaimed. "Tell me what it is."

She sat down at the table, and George told her what had taken place. He did not tell her that it was Richards whom they had seen when they burst into the chamber, but when he described how the water had poured in and how he had been left behind in the flooded chamber, she buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, poor little Peggy!" she cried.

Both of them exclaimed at her.

"Yes, oh yes, I know who it is," she said, "I know that Martin and Richards were the same. If I had told what I suspected before, this dreadful thing might not have come to pass. I wanted to save the scandal. But why didn't I? Oh, why didn't I?"

"How long have you known?" asked George.

"I suspected it for a long time," she said, "and I was sure of it when I went to Glasgow. But I had better tell you my story, and you must both of you be prepared to receive further surprises."

She wiped away the tears she had shed when the news of the terrible death had been revealed to her, and composed herself to her usual tranquillity of manner.

"And—Sir Guy," she said, "I am afraid you must prepare yourself for a bitter disappointment, for although it is possible that all my conclusions may not be right, yet I do not think that I am mistaken in them."

Guy made no reply, and Mrs. Herbert began her story.

"I was travelling in Italy with my dear husband just twenty-five years ago," she said, "we were on our honeymoon. We were staying in an hotel at Assisi, and Sir Roderick and Lady Bertram were in the same hotel. I think I told you this when I first knew you. Martin, Sir Roderick's valet, was with them, and I saw them often. Lady Bertram was expecting her confinement very shortly. There was another lady in the hotel, and she was in great trouble. She had been forsaken by her husband, who was a thoroughly bad man. She had just given birth to a delicate child, and when she should be well enough to leave her room she would have nowhere to go to and would be absolutely penniless. I need not tell you how I got to know her, but I did, and she told me her story. She was wrapped up in her baby. It was the only thing in life she had to cling to, but I saw that the poor little thing was not likely to live long, and I feared that if it was taken from her she would die too.

"On the twelfth of March I was taken ill myself, and was in bed for a few days. When I got up again I heard that Sir Roderick and Lady Bertram had left the hotel on the following day, and the lady I speak of had gone with them. I knew that Lady Bertram had taken an interest in her, and I was glad to think that she would be cared for. I

never saw her again. But her name was Mrs. Greenfield, and when you showed me a photograph of your mother I recognised it as that of my friend."

George made no movement of surprise. "It is very extraordinary," he said after a pause, "that our stories should be mixed up in this way. Have you anything more to tell me?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Herbert, "I have. I saw Mrs. Greenfield's baby before she left the hotel. One of its poor little arms was all twisted and deformed. Her wretched husband had ill-used her not very long before the child was born. And it had blue eyes like its mother, and very fair hair."

"You mean," said George, "that I am not the child that was born at Assisi?"

"You are as unlike it as you could possibly be, but the little twisted arm proves conclusively that you cannot be."

"Then who am I? Do you know?"

"I do not know. But I can guess, and I am pretty certain that I can guess right. I believe you are the son that was born to Sir Roderick Bertram at Foligno twenty-five years ago to-morrow—or rather to-day."

"Good God!" exclaimed George, "why do you say that?"

Mrs. Herbert rose from her seat, and taking a candle from the table held it in front of the picture of Sir Roderick Bertram.

"First of all, look at that," she said.

The two men stood gazing at the picture, and Guy looked from it to George. "The likeness is extraordinary," he said, "I wonder no one has noticed it before."

"It doesn't go far as proof," said George, maintaining a strong hold on his excitement.

Mrs. Herbert put the candle on the table and sat down again.

"Mrs. Greenfield left the hotel with Sir Roderick and Lady Bertram, as I told you," she said, "and all the charges she had incurred were paid. Our own next stopping-place, my husband's and mine, happened to be at Foligno, where Lady Bertram had been unexpectedly confined, and where she had died. I heard there that Mrs. Greenfield had gone on with Sir Roderick after Lady Bertram's death, and I also learnt that the child was

alive and under her care. Now you told me that she lived at Highgate on her own money, and that her affairs were administered for her by Mr. Richards, whom we know now to have been Martin. Where did the money come from? She had never seen her husband again until the last weeks of her life, and had thought him dead. And when she did see him he was destitute and she was giving him money. It could not have come from him. And there was money for your education and start in life, and Mr. Richards offended you by trying to influence your choice of a college. Where did that money come from, and why should he have interfered? What should he know about the colleges at Cambridge?"

"She told me that the money came from my father," said George.

"It came," said Mrs. Herbert, "from Sir Roderick Bertram, through Martin."

Guy got up from his chair and laughed unsteadily. "No wonder Mr. Richards wanted to know what I should do with myself if I lost everything," he said. "You are Sir George Bertram, and I am—nobody."

"Oh, my dear Guy," said George. "You are what you have always been. The whole story is wildly improbable. I beg your pardon, Mrs. Herbert. What you have told us is very extraordinary, and as far as your facts go they are not to be contradicted. But we shall find some other explanation of them. It is I who shall turn out to be nobody."

"I do not think so," she replied, "and I hope for your sake that it may not be so, although I am very sorry that all this mystery and secrecy will fall so heavily on Sir Guy."

"I don't doubt your conclusions," said Guy. "They are absolutely convincing. George, let me be the first to greet you as the head of my family and as my very respected cousin. It's all a matter of luck, and there's nobody I would rather see take his share of it than you. Now I'm off to bed."

He went out of the room without another word. There was nothing in his manner except an unwonted excitement to show how hard he had been hit by Mrs. Herbert's communication.

"Poor chap!" said George. "If you *are* right after all, Mrs. Herbert, I shall feel like a pretender."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MYSTERY CLEARING

THE last piece of machinery to be affected by the most cataclysmic crises in human life is the domestic routine of a large household. The party at Merrilees met at breakfast on that fourteenth of March as usual, and when George entered the dining-room, where he had heard the news so momentous as far as his future prospects were concerned only a few hours before, he found Mrs. Herbert presiding over the tea and coffee service, and helped himself to the dishes on the side table as if after a quiet night there was nothing before them but a day of ordinary work and ordinary pleasure. Bobby Conder and Calthorp followed him after a short interval. Lord Caradoc greeted the former and accepted the presence of the latter without comment, as if the appearance of a stranger at the breakfast table in a house ten miles away from the nearest railway station were one of the most ordinary occurrences in the world. He had been told that Calthorp was coming, who he was, and what he was coming for; but the information had not interested him, and he now talked placidly to George, totally oblivious of anything out of the common that was taking place in the house of Merrilees.

George found it very difficult to attend to him, and to make suitable replies, and was relieved when Bobby Conder's arrival turned the conversation to that statesman's experiences of travel. He sat opposite to Peggy, whose bright face, as she and Cicely laughed and talked together, showed how happy and contented she was at the present moment, and he reproached himself somewhat because during the few nearly sleepless hours he had spent alone he had given but little thought to Peggy and the trouble that was coming to her. He had gone over Mrs. Herbert's story in his mind again and again, and the circumstance of its details had forced him into a belief that the mystery of his birth was cleared up. He had emerged from struggling obscurity into the light of an

honourable name and a great position in the world, and as he looked at Cicely he could not prevent his heart leaping with a sudden impulse of happiness. The rosy gleam died away. There was much to go through before the difficulties and the discoveries that were thronging about them should adjust themselves to new conditions.

Guy came down last of all, when Lord Caradoc had already left the table. His face was pale, and there were dark rings under his eyes. George reproached himself again for his thoughts when he saw him. Whatever of satisfaction the new conditions might bring to him, it seemed that the man whose life had hitherto passed so pleasantly and so easily could only lose everything that he possessed and most of what he hoped for.

The two girls lingered while the late-comers ate their breakfast. They knew nothing of what had happened, but it was impossible but that an air of constraint should make itself felt. Presently Mrs. Herbert went out of the room and they followed her.

"I want to speak to you, Peggy," said George gravely, as he opened the door for them. "I will come to you in the morning room presently."

Peggy looked at him with a trace of alarm in her eyes.

"Very well, George," she said.

"Do these two know what Mrs. Herbert told us last night?" asked Guy when he came back to the table.

"No," said George.

"Better tell them," said Guy, "I have been thinking it over all the night. I haven't had a wink of sleep. It must be true, and the sooner it's out the better."

"Well, let us go into the smoking room," said George.

All traces of Calthorp's breakdown of the night before had disappeared. His face was keen and set as the four of them went into the smoking-room, and the door was closed behind them. In the conversation that followed there was little sign of emotion in the part he took or the views he put forward, and there was that in his manner which indicated that he would have resented any allusion to the wholly human episode which had for a moment brought the man of feeling to the surface through the crust of light cynicism which represented his character to nine-tenths of his acquaintances. He exhibited no surprise when Mrs. Herbert's story of the night before had been unfolded to

him, but quickly adjusted it in his mind to the train of events which had preceded it, refraining even from comment upon the effects it would have upon the lives of two of his friends.

"The story hangs together too well not to carry weight with it," he said when he had heard all that could be told him. "The only thing that is actually proved by it is that George is not the child that was born to Mrs. Greenfield in Italy. The whole course of events is so remarkable that there may very well be some other explanation of them than that which Mrs. Herbert has hit upon. There may be something among Martin's papers that will throw light on the whole affair. Now that he is dead it is the only thing to hope for. And there is a great deal that is unexplained. Why, for instance, should Sir Roderick have disowned his own son?"

"He was devoted to his wife," suggested Bobby Conder diffidently, "and the birth of the child cost her her life. That might be the explanation."

"It is the only possible one. Now, Martin was preparing to disclose a certain mystery and to deliver up the jewels to-day. That is on what would have been the twenty-fifth anniversary of Lady Bertram's death, and also of the child's birth. By-the-bye, George, what day has been kept as your birthday?"

"The fourteenth of March—to-day," said George.

The four men looked at one another. "That proves it," said Guy. "Mrs. Greenfield's baby was born some time before."

"It is another piece of evidence," said Calthorp. "Although I did not know of this new complication, and have not had time to adjust my ideas to it, I have been thinking things over and putting two and two together, and I think I can see a little further into the mystery than I did last night."

"In the first place everything points to this, that at the time we have now reached there was to have been some great change in Sir Roderick's life. The conversion of his great fortune into jewels would have been completed. His book would have been finished. What was the change to be?"

"He was going to recognise his son," said Guy.

"That may have been," said Calthorp, "But if it

were so it would not contradict what I think was going to happen. You remember the answer that Sir Roderick gave to the bank manager who asked him what he proposed to do for an income when he had turned all his capital into jewels."

"He said that at the end of fifteen years he should not want an income," said Guy.

"Exactly. We thought, if you remember, that that answer might have been accounted for by a presentiment of death on his part. As a matter of fact his death came naturally some six months before the end of the fifteen years, and he was plainly unprepared for it. He was a perfectly healthy man with no tendency to disease, according to the doctor. Why should he have expected his death at a certain definite date?"

"I don't quite see what you are driving at," said Guy.

"I will tell you. I have come to the conclusion that if he had not been carried off last June, Sir Roderick Bertram would have taken his own life—to-day."

There was a pause of astonishment. "What evidence have you got of that?" asked George.

"No direct evidence, of course. But it is the only solution that answers all the unexplained difficulties of his actions. A man may have a presentiment of death to come to him in a certain year, but no man would so order his life for at least fifteen years on the conviction that it was going to end on a certain day or in a certain month. We know that Sir Roderick did not expect to die *before* to-day because his death found his preparations incomplete. And there is no trace of any provision made for his living here or anywhere else after to-day, although of course he would never have wanted for money if he had lived.

"Then again these instructions to Martin. Martin was to do certain things. He was not told to hide the jewels. That was his own idea, and I haven't been able to fit it in. But if this new story about the son is true, it was probably because Sir Roderick had made up his mind to recognise him as his heir, but not until his twenty-fifth birthday, or after Sir Roderick's own death. And Martin kept as far as he could to what he knew were his master's wishes. He was possibly under oath.

"Well, there was nothing about hiding the jewels. But the preparations for Sir Roderick's death and the disposal

of his body were definitely made, and the date of it, not exactly but approximately, communicated to Braithwaite. I think that Sir Roderick meant to take his own life at this time. His body would have been laid by the side of his wife, and his place of burial destroyed by the letting in of the water. How the necessary secrecy would have been preserved of course we can't guess. Then Martin would have produced an account of his stewardship, all plain and above board from those wonderfully kept books upstairs, and the heir would have stepped into his place."

"It is an ingenious theory," said George, "but what bearing has it on what has happened?"

"Perhaps little," admitted Calthorp. "But one or two points seem clear. It is unlikely that Sir Roderick made a will. There was no reason why he should have done so before his arrangements were completed if he expected his death at a certain date, and if he had done so Martin would hardly have dared to keep it back, because you see, from what Braithwaite told us, he was prepared to make himself known to-day, and must have relied on the fact that in what he has done he was acting on Sir Roderick's instructions to exonerate him from all blame. He would have told us all that there was to tell by word of mouth, and therefore I am afraid it is unlikely that we shall find any written explanation of the mystery among his papers."

"His word would not be enough to prove that George was Sir Roderick's son," said Guy.

"It probably would," said Calthorp, "if he gave evidence under oath. But of that I knew nothing last night. It is possible that he brought with him papers to prove that if it is the case. If so, they will be found on his body."

"And that brings us," said George, "to what we have to do now. Everyone in the house must be told. I am going to ask Mrs. Herbert to tell poor little Peggy. She will do it better than I. Who is to tell Lord Caradoc?"

"You had better, I think," said Guy.

"Yes," said Bobby, "it had better come from you."

"Very well," said George. "And what steps are you going to take, Dick?"

"We must take immediate steps to get the water out of the chamber and tunnels," said Calthorp. "I had better

arrange for that now. I think that Lord Caradoc ought to be persuaded to leave the house for a time. It will become the centre of popular excitement again now, and for other reasons he will not be happy here for the present."

"I am afraid he will be a good deal upset by the news," said George. "I will go and tell him at once."

Lord Caradoc was, undoubtedly, greatly upset. He found it impossible to take in the story in its entirety, but he realised sufficiently that the coming disturbances at Merrilees would make it impossible for him to continue his residence there for the present, and he delivered an ultimatum to Mrs. Herbert that his household would have to be moved back to Berkeley Square not later than the following day.

Peggy received the news of her father's life-story and of his death with shocked surprise, but with no very violent expressions of grief.

"I had never learnt to love him," she said, when she had wept a little on Mrs. Herbert's shoulder. "But he was never unkind to me while I was with him in Glasgow, and I know he liked to have me there with him." She went to London with her new friends the next day, and remained there while the sad duties that had to be performed at Merrilees during the following week were carried out. Bobby Conder also went with them, and the house was left undisturbed to George, Guy, and Calthorp.

It proved no very difficult task to get the water out of the secret chamber and the approaches to it. The flood door was closed by means of the mechanism that had opened it and the water pumped out by way of the tunnel under the lake.

When the work was finished the three men descended again into the chamber by the way which had so nearly proved a path of death to them. It was with very pale faces that they entered it again. Martin lay where the rush of the inflowing water had struck him down. There were no signs of suffering on his face, but a look of peace which it had seldom borne during the last months of his strange life. George passed the place where he lay and looked with indescribable feelings on the bodies of the two whom he now acknowledged to himself as his father and mother.

The movements of the water had disturbed their posi-

tions. They now lay close together near the dead man, who, whatever his faults, had given them long and faithful service. The youth and beauty of the woman had been wonderfully preserved by the Italian embalmers. But for her faded dress it would have been impossible to think of her as having been dead for five and twenty years. The heavily-fringed lids were closed as if in sleep. The red mouth was slightly open, showing the line of ivory teeth, and the dusky hair which had been unloosened lay on her soft cheeks and all about her slender form. George gazed at her beauty long. He had given the love of a son to another, and told himself that he would never regret it. The memory of this sweet and delicate creature lived for him afterwards in other emotions.

He looked for the first time on the face of his father. His heart was sore that he had never been allowed to tender him the obedience and reverence of a son. He studied the noble head and the strong, straight form, that of a king among men in intellect and in manly beauty. How willingly would he have looked up to and learnt from such a man! Then he recalled the mastering love, the overwhelming loss, and the marred and disappointed life—a life not wasted, but given over to the carrying out of a great purpose; and yet a life robbed of all that it prized most. And he recalled with yet deeper emotion that, in spite of their estrangement, he himself had had some small part in his father's life. He had not disgraced the name he was now to bear, and there was evidence to show that his youth and early manhood had been watched, not without approval. Among Sir Roderick's papers he and Lord Caradoc had found that printed pamphlet of George's that had won a University prize. Its discovery had caused some surprise to George, but a sufficient explanation seemed to have been that it was on a subject in which Sir Roderick had been interested. But it had been kept apart from other similar papers, and he now hoped that it had given his father pleasure because it was his work. Other indications rose to his memory which seemed to show that Sir Roderick had recognised his son in his heart if not before the world, and he was to have clear proof that this was so later. He turned away with a sigh, and went out of the chamber and up under the sky, leaving to others the task of moving the three bodies from the

chamber of death. They laid them side by side in the little chapel and buried them later in the quiet churchyard at Northwaite, where they rest after their strange life amongst other Bertrams of older times and some of the dependants of that house who had served them faithfully.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MYSTERY CLEARED

CALTHORP'S conjecture that Sir Roderick Bertram had intended to take his own life on a certain date was never verified. It need only be said that no other explanation of details otherwise inexplicable in his course of action was ever discovered. In other respects the surmises of Mrs. Herbert and Calthorp were amply corroborated. Papers were found on Martin's body. They had evidently been brought to afford proof of what he had intended to tell by word of mouth. There were the certificates of birth of a son born by Mrs. Greenfield on February 26th, 18—, and a son born to Sir Roderick Bertram on March 14th. There was also the certificate of the death of Sir Roderick Bertram's son at Spoleto on March 17th. These papers by themselves seemed to show that there was no truth in the story that Lady Bertram's living child had been exchanged for Mrs. Greenfield's dead one. But other evidence of its truth was forthcoming, and poor Mrs. Herbert had to undergo the notoriety which came from telling openly what she knew of the story. The grave at Spoleto was opened, and George was finally proved to be Sir Roderick Bertram's son and heir to all his property.

The news of Martin's death brought down to Merrilees his former partner, Mr. McDougall, who brought information which cleared up the mystery surrounding the actions of the man who, under two names, has played so large a part in this story.

Mr. McDougall was a middle-aged Scotchman with a dried-up appearance and manner, and a strong Glasgow accent, which it would be impossible to produce in print, even if it were desirable. He told his story in an orderly unemotional way, which explained in some degree the curious part he himself had taken in it. For Mr. McDougall had been the only man in the British Isles who had known that Mr. Richards, quietly pursuing his business avocations in Glasgow, and Robert Martin, who was wanted by the

whole body of police of the United Kingdom, were one and the same man, and he had made no movement to betray his knowledge.

"I've brought a paper," he said, "which I was to put into the hands of Mr. George Greenfield, in the event of Robert Richards's death before his designs should be accomplished. But first of all I will tell you what I know of him, so that you may be able to straighten things in your minds.

"I first met him when we were both lads in the service of the Earl of Cumnock, who had an estate in Ayrshire. His lordship is long since dead and his family dispersed. I worked in the policies and Richards was footman, and went with the family to London and elsewhere. When they came to Scotland in the autumn of every year we foregathered. We were both above our places, if I may say so. I had a strong hankering after commerce, and you may say I was made for it, for I've now been many years in business, and I'm a warm man. Richards had the same wish and the same manner of capability, which was odd in two lads placed as we were and enough to bring us together. We would meet and talk over our plans and ambitions and we swore a compact, as lads will, to help each other in whatever we might undertake in the future and to keep one another's secrets, and so forth. And we were saving our money and meant to get out of service as soon as we could and start in business, together it might be, or, if not, one would always give the other a helping hand. It seems foolishness now in an under-footman and an under-gardener, but we were very much in earnest then, and you'll see how it turned out.

"Richards's plans were like to be rudely upset, for there was trouble in his lordship's house, and he was wrongfully blamed for it. There was a theft of jewels, and it looked so that Richards was the thief. I needn't go into details, but things were very black against him, by coincidence, and I make no doubt that if it hadn't been for Sir Roderick Bertram, who was staying in the house as a guest, he would have been tried and sent to prison as a thief and his character blasted for life. Richards had waited on Sir Roderick Bertram, who was a young bachelor then, and loaded for him and all that. He had told me about him and of how he was not like other young gentlemen, but

friendly though autocratic, and a man to serve with pride and pleasure. So when this trouble came, Richards plucked up courage and appealed to Sir Roderick to see him righted, and he did so, and found out the truth of the story, and when Richards was righted he took him into his own service. And it was then that Richards chose to be called by his second name, Martin, because of what had happened, and to make a fresh start.

"Soon after that I saw my way to starting in business in a small way, and I asked Richards to join me according to compact. But he said he was bound to his master's service, and wouldn't leave him this side of the grave. He was a man of strong character, and where he'd placed his duty and affections, there they'd stay. 'That's good-bye to your business career, then,' I said, and he said, 'Yes, I'm likely to end as I began, a gentleman's servant.'

"Then I lost sight of him for some years, and meantime I prospered. Well, some fifteen years ago I was surprised at him calling for me in my place of business in Glasgow, and for two men without the capacity for making many friends and not overburdened with sentiment, we came together in a surprising way. He told me that he had married and had a daughter, but his wife was dead. I have never married, which may account for my being able to keep the secrets which were afterwards disclosed to me without anybody guessing that I had any. Richards told me then that Sir Roderick Bertram had put a great deal of responsibility into his hands, and that he was more of a steward than a valet. And he told me that his master was treating him with a great generosity and was giving him commissions on purchases he was making for him just as if he was not in his regular employ. We talked over many things in detail and at last we came to an arrangement by which Martin should invest his money in my business, and if ever in the future he should leave Sir Roderick's service we should go into partnership and work together. And so it went on for many years, and occasionally Richards would come to see me in Glasgow, but as you may imagine under the circumstances, this is the first time I've been to Merrilees.

"Last June Richards came to me. He was much cast down by Sir Roderick Bertram's sudden death. Sir Roderick had died only two days before and the world at

that time had heard nothing of it. He said he was ready to take up the partnership that we had arranged for, but he warned me that there might be trouble coming for him. 'I will tell you what I can,' he said, 'and you can take your choice of having me with you and keeping your mouth closed about what I am going to tell you or letting me go away!' 'Let me hear first,' I said, 'what you have got to tell me. It won't go any further, whatever happens.' And you may imagine I was somewhat exercised by his story.

"He told me about his laying Sir Roderick's body, according to his master's instructions, in a secret place. He told me about the jewels, and that he had put them for the present in the same hiding place. He said that he knew what Sir Roderick's wishes with regard to his property were, and had been entrusted with the duty of carrying them out after his death, but that there was a secret which he had sworn not to divulge until after a certain date—namely the fourteenth of March in the following year, and that sooner than break his oath he would let matters take their course until that date, when he would disclose everything.

"'But, my good man,' I said, 'You don't see that you'll be accused of stealing the jewels, to say nothing of your master's body. There'll be a terrible outcry,' I said, 'when once the news is known, and you'll be taken, and made to tell what you know.'

"'I'll never do that,' he said, 'till the time comes, and I've thought of everything. I'm little known,' he said; 'I've never been photographed in my life, and I'm an ordinary-looking man. If you let me come quietly to this office to-morrow morning and begin work here, by the time the news is out nobody *here* will think of connecting me with Martin. It's a risk, but I'm ready to take it if you are, and I think it's less of a risk than you might imagine.'

"'And what will you do?' I said, 'if the police do find you?'

"'I'll put up with whatever I'm obliged to,' he said, 'till next March, and then I'll tell my story.'

"'Why not tell it now?' I said, 'and get it off your mind.'

"'I can't do that,' he said, 'I swore to do a certain thing and I'll keep my oath whatever it costs me.'

"Well, to cut a long story short, gentlemen, Richards settled down in Glasgow, and went about his business, and was never once suspected, even when the excitement was at its highest. He told me that he had once been recognised in London, but he went there as seldom as possible, and, as you know, he was never caught.

"Well, the day before the poor fellow's death, he reminded me that the time had come to end all the mystery. He was downcast, and not relieved, as I should have been, at the prospect of getting it off his mind. I think now that he had some presentiment of his end. At any rate, he acted as if we should never meet again. That is he put his will and other private papers connected with his property into my hands and told me how to act in the event of his death. He said he should be back again in two days' time, but had made everything straight in case of accidents. What accidents he did not say, and of course he could not have known the terrible end that was to overtake him. He also gave me this envelope addressed to George Greenfield, Esq. He said I should find you in this house, sir, and was to give it to you in the event of anything happening to him. He said good-bye to me without emotion, but I think he never expected to see me again. Things work out strangely in this life, and there's more in it than meets the eye."

With this somewhat trite observation, Mr. McDougall closed his long speech and put the envelope which he had been holding into George's hands. He betrayed no curiosity as to its contents; indeed, curiosity did not appear to be strongly developed in Mr. McDougall's character, and Mr. Richards could hardly have chosen a better confidant to whom to confide such of his secrets as he could not keep to himself. He left Merrilees shortly afterwards, saying that it was a busy time with him in Glasgow, but before he went he made another statement which may as well be recorded here.

Richards had executed a will, of which Mr. McDougall was sole executor, in which he had left everything he possessed to Peggy. Part of his money was invested and part had purchased his share in the business, a certain percentage of the profits of which were to be paid to his daughter. When her affairs were settled up by Mr. McDougall she was found to possess an income of between six and seven hundred a year.

The document which Mr. McDougall put into George's hands cleared up the whole mystery of Sir Roderick's life and what had taken place after his death. In part it recounted what was already known or guessed at, but it is here given in full. It bore a date of a few days previously, and began without any further preamble :—

“ This is directed to you under the name which you have always borne, of George Greenfield, but you are really Sir George Bertram, the only son of Sir Roderick Bertram, my late master. It will be put into your hands only in the event of my death before your birthday of March 14th, and not until then. I fully expect to be alive then to tell you by word of mouth what I now write, but in case of my death I put down on paper for you what you must then know, and I tell you a large part of the story of my own life, to clear my own memory of blame which you have at various times imputed to me.

“ I entered the service of Sir Roderick Bertram over thirty years ago. I was bound to him by exceptional ties of gratitude and respect, and these feelings have only grown stronger with years. You have known me as a man with very little natural affection, and I do not claim that you have misjudged my character in that respect ; but my devotion to Sir Roderick Bertram, ever since the time when he saved me from a serious but undeserved trouble and first took me into his service and gave me his confidence, has never wavered. It has been the strongest influence in my life. Perhaps it has absorbed all the feeling which other men devote to many objects, and it has guided me in everything I have done for the last thirty years. If you will bear this in mind you will understand some things in my behaviour towards yourself which have caused you anger in the past, and I do not deny that you have had reason to be dissatisfied.

“ I pass over the first five years of my service with Sir Roderick, during which I devoted all my energies to his welfare and his interests and gradually gained his complete confidence, so that while I always lived at Merrilees with the upper domestics and was to appearance his private servant, I became actually his secretary and afterwards his man of business. During his short married life I learnt to extend that regard which I felt for him towards his lady. There was never such happiness in wedded

life as Sir Roderick and Lady Bertram enjoyed during the year between their marriage and her death. All their lives were wrapped up in one another. When Lady Bertram died, only one who knew him through and through as I did could have told what a crushing blow it was to Sir Roderick. He made no expressions of grief, and outwardly he was almost unmoved; but, although his great powers of mind were untouched by what had happened, the change that came over him was all the more striking for that reason. The only harsh word I have ever received from him was at that time, when I ventured to say something to him of my sorrow on his behalf. He looked at me fiercely and said, 'Remember your place, and don't presume on it.' But then and always he was too great a man to be unjust, though you, perhaps, may not think so, and he added, 'You can show your loyalty by following my instructions implicitly.' 'That I will do as I have always done, sir,' I answered, and he said, 'I shall put you to the test.'

"I tell you these things so as to help you to understand Sir Roderick's actions, and also my actions in carrying out his instructions. A smaller man than he was, if he were capable of the depth of love that Sir Roderick bore towards his wife, would have shown more grief, but he would have got over it. Or it would have crushed him altogether. Sir Roderick never got over his loss till the day of his death. And it did not crush him altogether, as the naturalness of his after life within the limits he chose for it showed. Perhaps one part of his brain gave way and caused him to undertake the work which he spent the last twenty-four years of his life over in solitude, instead of living in the world as he had done before. Of course he never talked to me of these things, but I have thought over them very often and that is my view of the matter. And there is another point which seems to go with this view, and that is his conviction that his life would end on the day twenty-five years after his lady's death. He was accustomed to talk of that to me as if it was a fixed and natural thing, and, as you will see, all his arrangements were made to fit in with it. I know what will be said as to this, and I have no further explanation to offer one way or the other. I will close this part of my subject by saying that the motive which swayed Sir Roderick's life was the never-dying devotion to the memory

of his wife, and the motive that has directed all my actions has been unquestioning obedience to his will.

"In the year 18— Sir Roderick and Lady Bertram were travelling in Italy. We had two travelling carriages, and went from one place to another in the old-fashioned way. There was a courier in attendance as well as myself and her ladyship's maid, who was an Italian woman. On March 12th, 18— we were at Assisi. Lady Bertram was expecting her confinement in a few weeks. Mrs. Greenfield was staying in the same hotel and had given birth to a child some little time before. She had been forsaken by her husband and was destitute. My lady heard of her story and took pity on her, and asked Sir Roderick to take her to England with us. We left Assisi together and our next stopping place was Foligno. There Lady Bertram was unexpectedly confined on March 14th, and in the evening she died.

"I will say nothing further of Sir Roderick's grief, but will record what happened briefly. Lady Bertram's body was embalmed, and we continued our journey the following day. The courier was sent to Civita Vecchia to engage a yacht to be ready for us when we reached the coast. Sir Roderick told me shortly that he was going to take the body home to Merrilees and that it was not to be known. The Italian maid had been sent away, and Mrs. Greenfield readily promised secrecy. Her own child was then very ill, and at Spoleto, our next stopping place, it died.

"At Spoleto Sir Roderick summoned me and said, 'Are you prepared to follow implicitly any instructions I may give you?' I said 'Yes' at once, and he asked for no further assurances. He told me in a quiet matter-of-fact way that he would never see the child nor recognise it as his son. He told me to make a proposal to Mrs. Greenfield. I was first of all to say that she would be amply provided for. This was, no doubt, because Lady Bertram had befriended her. I was then to ask her to take the child and bring it up as her own. She was never to disclose the facts of its birth to anyone. It was like Sir Roderick not to make his offer of a provision for her dependent upon her consent, but it probably went a long way towards persuading her. Her own child was dead, and she clung very closely to you. She had nursed you from the hour

of your birth. When I had won her consent she saw Sir Roderick and made a solemn oath of secrecy as he desired. She was sent home to England, and settled in Highgate, as you know. Her own child was buried at Spoleto on March 17th and a stone put up as if it was Sir Roderick's son.

"As we were on our way home in the yacht we had chartered for the purpose, Sir Roderick told me of his intentions with regard to Lady Bertram's body. He said that when Sir Michael Bertram had rebuilt the old house of Merrilees, he had gone to great expense in constructing a secret chamber within the walls of the park. I may tell you this much, but am not at liberty to say more, and the secret is so well guarded that it is unlikely that it will ever be discovered. It had been handed down by word of mouth from father to son, and no one but Sir Roderick knew of the existence of the chamber. He told me that the story of this chamber and the use to which Sir Michael, his ancestor, had put it was a very curious and interesting one, and that he had written a book about it which he should now destroy. I do not know whether he ever did so, or whether his book is still in existence. I never saw it, and he told me nothing of the story itself but only that the chamber was there, and how it was to be reached.

"Here Lady Bertram's body was to be laid, and when Sir Roderick himself should come to die his body was to be laid beside hers, and all traces of the chamber itself destroyed. Afterwards I was given fuller instructions on these points. But we landed safely and secretly on a little inhabited part of the coast, and Lady Bertram's body was laid to rest in the appointed place.

"That was the only time I visited the chamber until Sir Roderick's own death, but every night of his life during those twenty-four years he went there himself and kept his grief and his memory alive.

"We very soon dropped into ordinary ways of life at Merrilees. Sir Roderick spent his days like any other gentleman, except that he saw no one but the servants in his house. Day after day and year after year he worked at the great book which you know of. His recreations were the garden and the collection of pictures, furniture and other things of which you know also, but this did not begin until a year or two later. I need not go further into these

things. I acted for him throughout and was in many ways deep in his confidence. But in others he would simply give me his instructions without any explanation, and I was not on such terms with him as allowed me to ask him any questions.

"I must mention one occurrence which seemed unimportant at the time, but has had an important effect upon what has since occurred. Sir Roderick had given me definite instructions to buy a certain picture which was to be sold by auction. This was some years after Lady Bertram's death, and I had done my best to fit myself to be of use to him in these matters, and had got to consider myself something of an expert. When I saw this picture, I judged it to be a forgery, and I made no offer for it. It was bought by a dealer for a large sum. When I told Sir Roderick of this on my return from London he said, 'Is that how you keep your promise of obedience to my directions? Go back and buy the picture from the dealer.' I was nearer to feeling anger against Sir Roderick then than I have ever been, but I did what I was told. I had to give the dealer a thousand pounds more than he had paid for it. When we had completed the bargain I said, 'My own opinion is that the picture is a forgery, but I have been told to buy it.' The dealer replied, 'I'm quite sure it is, but I have been offered a profit for it from America.' So I went back hoping that Sir Roderick would do justice to my knowledge. Directly he saw it, he said, 'You may put it away. I don't want to see it again.' I looked to him to make some acknowledgment that I had been right, but he went on, 'You have got to know about these things, Martin, and when you told me your opinion I believed it to be a right one. I trust your knowledge of these things after my own. But in this case I gave you no directions to exercise your judgment. I told you to buy the picture. It is worth, perhaps, five pounds, and I have paid five thousand for it. But I would have paid a hundred thousand, or more, to have the assurance that I could trust you to carry out my instructions to the letter without questioning them.' Then I saw it all, and I said at once, 'I give you my solemn promise, sir, to carry out all your instructions to the letter for the future.' 'Then this five thousand pounds which the world would call thrown away,' he said, 'will be the best investment I ever made.'

"I ask you to bear this story in mind when I come to my actions after Sir Roderick's death.

"I now come to matters which will be in your own remembrance. When the arrangement with Mrs. Greenfield was come to it was settled that she should have £500 a year for her life. This I paid her regularly, at first in gold, and afterwards, when I made business connections in Glasgow, by cheque upon my bank there under my own name of Richards. This was done so that the chances of your discovering when you grew up my identity with Martin, Sir Roderick's servant, should be done away with as far as possible. The arrangements were my own. Sir Roderick only told me to conceal all clues. There were difficulties in the way of purchasing an annuity, and I paid the money every quarter.

"For seven years your name was never mentioned by Sir Roderick. In the meantime I married the daughter of a farmer at Morthwaite. She was the last member of a good old yeoman stock, and my girl has no reason to be ashamed of her parentage on her mother's side. We lived in one of the cottages on the island, and when my wife died I went back to the house. Sir Roderick had previously bought the two hundred acres which were my father-in-law's. Upon the death of my wife he asked me what I intended to do with my child. I told him that a lady had promised to give her a home, and when he asked me that lady's name, and where she lived, I told him. He looked at me in his searching way, and I saw instantly what was in his mind. I had had no idea in making the arrangement but that Mrs. Greenfield was the best woman I knew, and the one whom I could best trust to bring up my child. But my motives might have borne a very different interpretation, and it was a proof of the confidence that Sir Roderick now placed in me that beyond that one penetrating look he made no comment on my decision. What he did say caused me more surprise than anything else could have done. He said, 'Bring me news of the child,' and then turned away.

"You had just gone to school and were doing well, and I told him what I could. After this, whenever I visited Highgate it was an understood thing that I was to report your progress to Sir Roderick. He never made any remarks on what I told him, but occasionally asked me questions,

But nothing he ever said caused me to believe that he had changed his mind about you, and I am sure that at this time he had not done so. Even when you were ready to leave school and Sir Roderick told me that he should put aside a thousand pounds for your further education and start in life he told me expressly that his object was to help you to make a living in the class of life you would belong to as Mrs. Greenfield's son. He said that if you showed a desire for a University career it would be better that you should go to one of the smaller colleges at Oxford or Cambridge. When I learnt that you intended to go to Trinity College at Cambridge, which was where I knew Sir Roderick had been himself, you will remember that I tried to stop you. But when I told Sir Roderick he said that if you won a scholarship it would not interfere with his aim in providing the money. When you did so I am sure he was pleased, and from that time I know he paid attention to what he heard of you from time to time.

"I do not know when he first altered his intention of never recognising you as his son. I know he got more and more interested in what he read of your doings at Cambridge, and I know he once saw your photograph in one of the illustrated papers with other members of a cricket eleven. It was after you had been made a Fellow of Trinity College that he made known his intention to me. He kept to his first decision of never seeing you, but he then told me that you were to succeed him and inherit his property. He told me that I was to make your birth known to you on the 14th of March this year, assuming as he always did that he himself should then be dead. I gave the required promise. I am quite sure that if he had had the slightest idea that he would die before that date he would have authorised me to reveal everything immediately after his death. I will go even further than that and say that when he said 'the 14th of March' he *meant* 'the day of my death.' But since the occasion I have mentioned it has been my pride to do as I then promised and carry out his instructions to the letter without taking any responsibility for interpreting them on myself. And I am proud now of having done so in this instance at very great risk to myself. When I meet my master again, as I hope to, I shall be able to give him this instance of my obedience. And I believe that even you, who have suffered by it, will

not blame me now for having kept my solemnly made promise.

“ I think I owe you some explanation of my attitude towards yourself through the years of your youth and afterwards, and perhaps some sort of apology for it. It may seem strange that, holding the feelings of devotion and reverence to Sir Roderick that I did, and being proud to obey him as a servant, I did not show more respect to you, his son. It is not easy for me to enter into these matters but as this paper will only come into your hands, if it ever does so, after my death, I feel that I should like as far as possible to justify my actions to you.

“ You were to be brought up as Mrs. Greenfield's son, and for some years it was as Mrs. Greenfield's son that I regarded you. And when the fact of your true birth struck me, as it could not help doing sometimes—for you grew to be very like Sir Roderick—I remembered it with resentment. Sir Roderick had disowned you because your birth had cost the life of his wife, and I disliked you for the same reason, because it had destroyed my master's happiness. When he began to take an interest in you I disliked you still more. If you were to put this down to a feeling of jealousy I could not contradict you; but you must remember my devotion to Sir Roderick, and excuse it. And there was another reason. When you began to worry me with questions about the past I received them with impatience and a strong feeling of anger. I had acted so successfully in hiding all traces of your true parentage, and the secret had been so well kept, partly by my management, partly by good fortune, and it had come to be so easy to keep, as I thought, that I deeply resented your attempts to get at the truth. And your attitude towards me was so like what your father's would have been in a like case, fearless and independent, and that added to my resentment. At various times when you pressed me for an explanation I could only take refuge in obstinate denials, and get out of the difficulty as well as I could. You may remember one occasion upon which you threatened to come up to Glasgow and trace my antecedents. This was while Sir Roderick was still alive, and, although I had taken the precaution to provide myself with an address in Glasgow, if you had done as you threatened you might have discovered everything. Once or twice you drove me into a corner, but that was the closest escape.

“ I ought to say something about Mrs. Greenfield. On thinking over the past you may come to the conclusion that she displayed an unreasonable fear of your discovering the secret. She was of course bound by her oath to Sir Roderick, and was too conscientious to break it. But a far more powerful motive in her case was her intense dread of your discovering that you were not actually her son. Until Sir Roderick made up his mind to restore you to your rights after his death this feeling of hers greatly helped towards the preservation of secrecy, but when I announced his intention to her things became very difficult. She could not bear the idea of the disclosures that were to come, and I believe that the dread of them had as much to do with the illness which led to her death, as the persecution she was unfortunately submitted to at the hands of her rascally husband. I was very sorry for this, as I have always felt a deep regard for Mrs. Greenfield since the time I told you of a few years ago ; but I could not help it. She never liked me from the first. I knew that, and she had almost a horror of Sir Roderick and of everything connected with Merrilees. She never hid her opinion that Sir Roderick was out of his mind, and that I was wrong in carrying out his wishes. But she was bound by her oath and by her strong attachment to you.

“ I now come to the date of Sir Roderick’s death. I need not go into great detail concerning my actions, as you will understand them if you have read what I have written carefully. When he was taken ill I was in London. I returned before his death, but he was unconscious, and afterwards I could only carry out as faithfully as possible his instructions and what I knew to be his wishes. With regard to the disposal of his body I knew what to do. It was to be laid beside that of his lady in the secret chamber, and their burial-place then concealed for ever. He allowed me one assistant, a gardener, Braithwaite, whom I knew I could trust. We laid his body in the place appointed, and I paid Braithwaite the money that had been promised to him and sent him out of the country. I have now sent for him again, and on March 14th we shall by destroying the chamber complete that part of the charge. The burial-place of your father and mother is the only thing which I cannot disclose to you, and my disposal of my master’s body in secrecy is the only thing that may bring me trouble

when I make known the other facts. But, whatever happens I shall never disclose it.

"So far my duty was clear, and if I could then have made known the secret of your birth to you and handed over the property which was to come to you all would have been well. But I would not do that before the appointed time, and it was made possible for me to prevent the greater part of your inheritance falling into other hands in the meantime by its being in the form of precious stones. I have read the explanation that Sir Roderick is said to have given the manager of the bank at Keswick for his decision to turn his great fortune into jewels. It is the true one. He never made any secret of it. When the house of Merrilees became full of the things he had bought, and the money which he had not been able to spend had increased very considerably, he hit upon this method of spending it and yet keeping its value for his heir.

"That heir, until he decided to recognise his son, was to be Mr. Guy Bertram. But Sir Roderick took very little interest in that gentleman. He had given him a good allowance, but Mr. Bertram had never done anything with his time or opportunities, and for the last ten years I never remember Sir Roderick mentioning his name. But he was his only living relative besides yourself, and he would have succeeded to all Sir Roderick's property if Sir Roderick had not decided eventually to recognise you as his son. I do not know whether he meant to leave him anything in his will, as he never told me, but, as he never made a will, you will naturally succeed to everything.

"Sir Roderick had told me that I was to be sole executor of his estate, and I knew that I ought to hand over to you, his heir, all his property. But I could not do this before March 14th of this year without disclosing the secret, and I could not prevent Mr. Bertram from taking possession. What I could do was to prevent the bulk of Sir Roderick's fortune, which was represented by the jewels, from falling into his hands, and I did this by hiding them in the same secret place in which I had laid Sir Roderick's body. When the time comes I shall produce them, or if I die before that, Braithwaite, who knows where they are, has my instructions to produce them.

"Having done what I felt it my duty to do, I went straight to Glasgow and took up the partnership which

was at my disposal in my present firm, and by the time the facts of the case became known, and the hue and cry was raised against me, I had been for some days quietly working at my business. I consider it a fortunate chance that I have not been found out here. If that had happened, as I feared it would, I should have given up the jewels, if I could have done so without disclosing the secret of where I had hidden them, and put up with whatever might have come to me for the rest until the appointed time. I fully hope, now that I have been able to keep myself undiscovered for so long, that I shall be able to keep everything to myself until the 14th of March, when you will come by your own, and I shall be rid of a great responsibility.

"I do not think there is anything more to say. I have explained everything as well as I am able, and I ask you not to think harshly of me. In all these things I have tried to do my duty by my master, Sir Roderick Bertram, whom it has been the object of my life to serve to the best of my powers, and whom I fully hope to meet again in another world.

"ROBERT MARTIN RICHARDS."

George had taken this paper into the inner library to read first of all by himself before he should make its contents known to Guy and Calthorp. He sat for a long time thinking when he had read the last page and laid it down in front of him. Many things became clear to him which had hitherto been hidden, but there was no bitterness in his mind against the man whose actions, so crooked and yet, when the circumstances were known, so logical, had caused him such disquiet. It was rather pity that swayed him as he thought of Richards's life, devoted to one overmastering purpose, laudable enough in itself, but leading him in its exaggeration of its compulsion on himself to such strange travesties of loyalty, and bringing him in the end to so terrible a death.

But it was towards his father that his thoughts naturally turned themselves. Here again he felt no bitterness towards the man who had disowned him and condemned him to a life of probable obscurity and poverty. He admitted no doubt in his mind of the conviction that, in spite of Sir Roderick's being in complete possession of his wonderful brain power in most of the affairs of life until the end, in

one he had been thrown off his balance, and must not be judged as other men. The thought that took most hold of him was that his father had been proud of him. He thanked God that he was permitted to know that. He sat for a long time at the table which Sir Roderick had used daily through the long years of his lonely life, and tried to picture to himself with a yearning that he could not repress. If only a year could roll back, and he could be in this room with the man who had then sat where he was sitting now! If only he could have spoken the few words to him that would have given him the memory of his voice and his look!

He thought of his own past life. There was nothing to regret in the way of it. He was better off now, he told himself, than if he had always been surrounded by the circumstances of wealth and position. And he had the supreme satisfaction of knowing that it had recommended itself to his father, nay more, that by his own steady, upward course he now stood where he did, acknowledged before the world as his father's son. His only regret—and it was very deep—was that he had never known his father, never heard him speak, and never taken his hand. Well, it was of no use sighing for what could never be.

He turned again to the paper before him, and read it through a second time. His thoughts turned to Guy, whose house of cards had now fallen, demolished finally and completely by the bald facts of this document. What was he to do, deprived of his income and with no profession by which he could hope to earn a living, at any rate for some time to come? His own great wealth had coloured George's thoughts scarcely at all. He considered it now as a means of being able to provide for his newly found cousin, as his own father had provided for him. But he knew enough of Guy to make him diffident of offering him money. There must be some way out of the difficulty. He shrank from going out to read the paper to Guy. He rose and went to the window looking west into the wood, carpeted with wild daffodils. He turned over the question in his mind, but it gradually ceased to hold him, and he mused again on his father and on the story he had just read.

He turned again to the writing table, and opened the drawer in which he and Lord Caradoc had found the

pamphlet containing his own prize essay. The drawer was filled almost entirely with the catalogues of second-hand booksellers and other similar papers. George turned them over. He had opened the drawer with the hope of finding the illustrated paper containing his portrait which Martin had mentioned, or some other sign of his having been in his father's thoughts. There was nothing except the prize essay. He was just about to close the drawer when his eye was caught by the corner of a sheet of paper sticking out of the page of a catalogue of plants. It was covered with the writing which he knew to be his father's, pencil jottings of a large order despatched to the nurseryman. He turned the paper over. There was a list of names and initials on the other side, and against them were pencilled sums of money. On the top was written the word "Legacies," and below it at the head of the list "G. C. Bertram, £30,000." George's heart leaped with pleasure. He had come upon just what he wanted at that moment, although not what he was looking for. It was a rough memorandum of the legacies his father had intended to leave out of the great fortune which was to go to his son.

George hesitated no longer, but went out of the room with the two papers in his hand to disclose their contents to Guy.

CHAPTER XXX

THE END OF THE STORY

IN the autumn of the year there was a double wedding at Hollingbourne Hall, Lord Conder's seat in Hertfordshire. So wide was the hospitality of the Conder family, and so rejoiced was Lord Conder to put his seat in Hertfordshire at the disposal of any one of his numerous relatives who had no seat of his own, but wished for the temporary use of one for any function of this sort, that it seemed the most obvious thing in the world that Cicely, who had accepted the offer that George had made her a few months before, should be married from her uncle's house. Lord Caradoc had not again returned to Merrilees after the startling events of the spring had once more made that house a centre of universal interest; and his tenancy was now at an end. He had not, however, found another country house to his liking, and nothing, not even his daughter's wedding, would have induced him to spend as much as a week in his castle in Wales. He had been quite happy during the three months of the summer, for the fates had been kind enough to enable him to rent his old rectory for that period. He had been driven out of it, however, at the end of August, and when Lady Conder had suggested that Cicely should be married from Hollingbourne Hall, at the instigation of Mrs. Herbert, he had fallen in with the suggestion with sufficient show of gratitude to make it plain that the castle in Wales had begun to throw a somewhat persistent shadow across his path.

Peggy had lived in Lord Caradoc's household ever since her father's death, and her short, interrupted courtship had renewed itself, to her quiet and increasing happiness. The reversal of Guy's prospects and fortunes had borne on him hardly at first, and a chorus of sympathy had risen to the heavens on account of a young man who was deprived at one blow of a baronetcy, a vast fortune, and one of the most beautiful houses in England. But before it had died down Guy himself discovered that there were compensations

in his lot, and, as a matter of fact, was happier than he had ever been in his life before. The fortunate discovery of the sheet of Sir Roderick's notes made it possible for him to accept from George a sum of money which provided him with a sufficient income, and, as Peggy was now an heiress in a small way, their married life would begin under favourable circumstances, financial and otherwise.

Guy had lost a great deal, but he had won Peggy, and, with his easy adjustable nature, he accepted what the gods had sent him and was a happy man. It came to be settled that he and Peggy should be married at the same time as George and Cicely, and the hospitalities of Hollingbourne Hall were as freely extended to this second marriage as they had been to that of Lord Conder's niece.

On the evening before the wedding George, Guy, Bobby Conder, and Calthorp were dining together at the old White Hart Inn in the village of Hollingbourne. The two bridegrooms and their solicitor were staying there, and Bobby Conder, who was to act as best man to both of them, had come over to dine on the last night of their bachelorhood. After dinner the four of them, who had been through such stirring experiences together, talked over all that had happened within the last year. Guy was by far the most excited and light-hearted of them all.

"I wouldn't exchange my prospects now for any I had a year ago for anything in the world," he said. "George, my boy, as I've often told you, there's no one envies you your possessions less than your respectful cousin Guy Bertram."

"My only regret as far as you are concerned," said George, "is that you were allowed to take my place for those months only to be disappointed of it in the end."

"Oh, I don't mind that," said Guy airily. "It is something to have called a house like Merrilees one's own if it was only for eight months. And there's my cottage in Surrey ready for me and Peggy, the prettiest little place in the world. I should never have built that or put some of the most beautiful things from Merrilees into it if I hadn't been bluffed into calling myself Sir Guy Bertram for that short time. My dear George, your wedding present of all those treasures will always stand to me as the symbol of munificence."

"You make me ashamed," said George. "I wish you

would take a lot more. You know you can have whatever you like."

"I have enough, and more than enough," said Guy. "In fact, I don't think I've got anything left to wish for."

"How about the painting?" asked Bobby Conder.

"The painting," said Guy, "will be carried on diligently in the commodious studio attached to Mr. Bertram's cottage in Surrey. In about twenty years' time, or less, there will be two baronets of the name of Bertram, and one of them will have the letters R.A. after his name."

"May it be so," said Bobby, "and I will buy your first picture if the price is not too stiff, and if they don't start too many new football clubs in my constituency."

"I have booked the first picture," said George. "It is to be hung with the rest at Merrilees."

"With two such patrons clamouring for my works," said Guy, "my future is assured."

The talk drifted back as it often did when these four were together, to the events of the past year, culminating in that terrible moment when they had battled their way up the secret stair from the deadly rush of water. They talked of Sir Roderick and his strange life, and they talked of Richards.

"What I shall never forgive that gentleman for," said Calthorp, "was his calm assurance in sitting down quietly in a place like Glasgow and letting me and my detectives run all over England, to say nothing of Italy, looking for him. It is a point that I shall not dwell on when I am recounting the story of Merrilees to the children gathered round my knee."

"It is just as well that you did not find him," said George. "He would have told us nothing, and the consequences to him might not have been pleasant."

"Do you think he would really have held out," asked Bobby, "if he had been run to earth?"

"I do," said George. "His devotion to what he thought his duty to—to my father was almost a monomania with him. I don't think he would have minded in the least what happened to himself if he could have kept his trust."

"I agree with you," said Calthorp. "He would never have told anything until the time came. And 'monomania' is the right word. We have all of us got at least one such idiosyncrasy. His was—what we know it was.

Mine is an inclination to go to bed when I feel sleepy, so I think I will say good-night."

George accompanied Bobby Conder on his homeward way, and when he had parted from him at the door of the Hall, walked slowly back under the September moon, thinking of many things. His mood was not as light as Guy's. The change which had brought him great possessions had brought him sorrows as well, which had left their mark on his character. He asked himself why his thoughts were melancholy on the eve of a day on which he was to gain the supreme desire of his heart. He loved Cicely with all the strength of his nature. He had loved her from the first, and his love had only deepened through the months which had followed. And yet there had been none of that thrilling joy in his courtship which had made the same months pass like a delightful dream to Guy and Peggy. He was beset with doubt as to whether he had done well in forcing his love, as he expressed it to himself, upon the shy, exquisite creature who had been a friend to him since he had first known her, but had never of her own accord given him the response to his deep passion that a lover craves for. Cicely had accepted him. Why should she have accepted him if she did not love him? Did she love him? He could not tell. She had never told him so, and he had never asked her. He had put the strongest constraint on himself during the past months never to frighten her by an undue display of his feelings towards her. Those months had brought him more pain than pleasure. He had done his utmost to make her love him, but there was nothing to show that he, who had succeeded in everything that he had set his mind to, had succeeded in this. To-morrow Cicely was to become his wife. He stood under the light of the harvest moon and vowed his life to her service. He would wait for her love until she yielded it to him of her own accord. His wooing should not cease with his marriage, and by-and-bye he prayed that he might be blessed with that beside which his wealth and his name were as nothing to him.

The things which we have recorded took place some years ago. Before we leave the characters with whom we have watched the strange course of events we will take a glimpse at their after-life when the public interest in their

affairs had died down again. And first we will visit the spacious cottage amongst the pines of the Surrey hills the country home of that popular artist Guy Bertram, A.R.A.—the country home only, for Guy Bertram spends part of the year in a fine house in London, where many rich and beautiful ladies come to him to be portrayed in a manner which is eminently pleasing, but will scarcely hand down his name to posterity among the great portrait painters of the century. Guy's vogue as a fashionable painter dates from the time when his name came finally before the public as that of one who, in the expressive words of Mark Twain's "Dauphin," had been "snaked down out'n a high place," and he had had no lack of patronage ever since. His portraits were not so good as Sir Joshua's, but they were a good deal better than those of other artists whose reputations have at times stood high, and that they were appreciated by a nation which does not insistently demand great work, and often fails to recognise it when it sees it, was proved by the fact that his commissions showed no signs of falling off, and he had more than once increased his charges. Guy, in fact, was a rich man, far richer than he had been during his short possession of Merrilees, and he was a very happy one.

Perhaps his happiest days were spent in the house to which he had taken his bride after their wedding at Holingbourne Hall and their honeymoon, spent in Italy. The cottage had been enlarged, but, with its thatched roof, its red walls, and its oak timbers, it was still a cottage, and as pretty a one as any artist could wish to inhabit.

Mrs. Guy Bertram was in the rose-garden filling the basket she carried on her arm from the loaded, fragrant bushes. She was the same happy, roguish Peggy of her girlhood—at least, when she was alone with her husband and children, for as the wife of a distinguished painter she had a reserve of matronly airs to exploit in her fine house in Kensington. Guy was lounging by her side in his painting jacket, smoking a cigarette. His easel was under the cedar on the lawn, and he was engaged for his own satisfaction on a portrait of his eldest son, who was not a good sitter, and had escaped from his thralldom when he saw his mother come out of the house with her flower basket. Guy had altered very little. He was a handsome man, as some of the more indiscreet amongst his lady

patrons had sometimes hinted to him ; but he had eyes only for one woman among them all, and was never so content as when he was strolling by her side, as now, through his beautiful garden.

The little boy had run off to greet a friendly gardener. Guy took his wife's face between his hands and turned it towards his own.

"Do you remember Hampstead Heath and the blind man and his dog ? " he asked.

Peggy's eyes grew moist. "We have never been there since," she said. "Let us make a pilgrimage when we go up to London."

"We will wait till the proper day comes round," he said. "Then we will go there and renew our vows. Not that they want much renewing. They will never wear out, will they, sweetheart ? "

"No, never," said Peggy. "Guy, you mustn't do that. I am an elderly married woman, and the gardener is looking at us."

"So did the blind man," said Guy, "and he made no complaint. Where is that young rascal George ? Among the strawberries again, I'll be bound. I must go and find him."

It was the time of the roses at Merrilees, too. The terraces lay in all their June beauty under the evening sun, which shone on the sleeping waters of the lake and the heavy folds of the encircling woods. The rooks were homing one by one across the sky, and making a tremendous commotion at the end of their journey. The cascade chimed its silvery way down its flower-laden channel, and all the sights and sounds of that most beautiful place fell gratefully on the senses of the two who were pacing the topmost terrace and pausing every now and then to look at the fair scene that lay spread out before them.

Cicely was hanging on her husband's arm. The look in her eyes as she turned towards him no less than the deep content that rested on his face showed that George had found his way to the innermost sanctum of her heart, and that his fears and doubtings were over for ever.

"Think of what we should have been doing now if we had not broken away from the round and come down here ! " Cicely was saying.

"Eating a dinner much too big for anybody in a hot room," said George, "with the prospect of a night of dull debate for me and for you a round of duller parties. This is better, isn't it?"

"Yes, this is better," she said. "I wish it could last longer."

"We must go back and do our work till the end of the session," said George. "Then we will come down here again and steep ourselves in the delights of this lovely place until we get tired of being alone together."

"I wonder when that will be?" said Cicely softly.

"Ah, when?" said George, drawing her to him. "And I wonder how much I should care for Merrilees if I had not you here to share it with me?"

"Would you do what poor Sir Roderick did if—if——"

"Oh, don't," said George, an expression of pain crossing his face. "It is the one thing in life that I could not bear. My darling! But I know now how he felt and how impossible it was for him to face the world after that came to him. I only wonder that he kept the force of mind necessary to make him write that great book. I could not have done it."

"When we come up here do you think of him very much?" Cicely asked. "I do. And I pity him more and more."

George turned towards the west, where behind the trees were the graves clustered round Morthwaite Church.

"I think of him joined to her whom he loved best in the world," he said, "never again to be parted. I no longer regret anything. My life is so full of happiness that there is no room for regret. And I owe it all to you, my heart. Without you this beautiful house of Merrilees would be nothing to me. With you it is Paradise."

They turned from the paling sky and went indoors. They were met at the door of the library by Lord Caradoc, older and rather more bent, but otherwise the same courteous scholarly gentleman of former years. Lord Caradoc had not yet succeeded in finding a country house more to his taste than his castle in Wales, which he had never visited since his daughter's marriage. He spent the greater part of his time at Merrilees, and was devoted to his little granddaughters. Of grandsons he had none, and

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this was the only hint of a shadow across the path of George and Cicely.

"If you will come and discuss that point we spoke of when you are disengaged," he said to George, "you will find me in the library."

"I will come in a few minutes," said George. "Cicely and I are going up with Mrs. Herbert to look at the babies."

And so we must leave the house of Merrilees, with the cloud of sorrow and mystery that had rested on it so long lifted at last, and nothing but peace and contentment to be found under its roof.

THE END

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